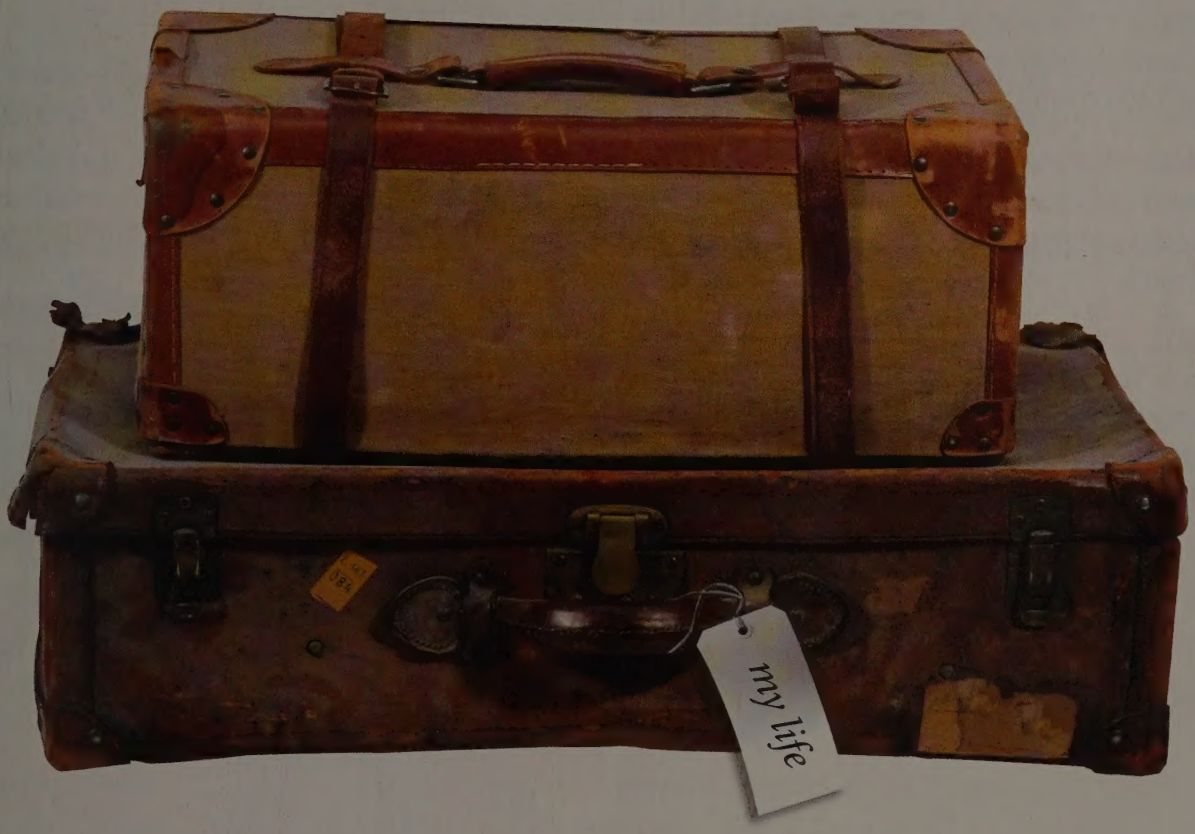
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November 2007

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Traveling Back in Time
An Oasis in the Desert
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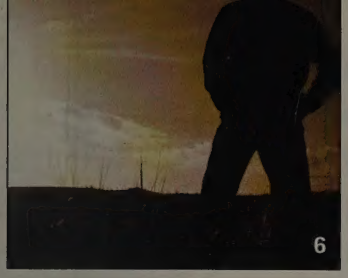


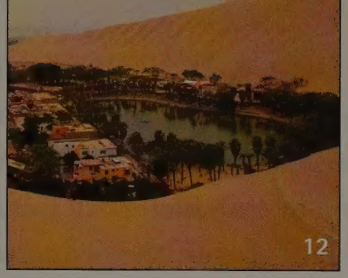
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HOLY COMFORT

VOLUME 20 NUMBER 09 NOVEMBER 2007

Comfort comes, but not always in the places we expect. As we travel in the wilderness of mourning, we are sometimes blessed in our losses.

6 **The Valley of the Shadow** — Learn how a family was comforted during a time of serious illness. *Terri Mork Speirs*

Women of the ELCA Grants and Scholarships — Read how you make a powerful difference in the lives of women around the world through your generous gifts to Women of the ELCA.

12 **An Oasis in the Desert** *Emily Bauska*

14 **Support One Another in Our Callings** *Terri Lackey*

18 **Traveling Back in Time: All Saints' Day 1517** — Travel to All Saints' Day in 1517 and find out what happened the day after Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the Castle Church door. *Joy A. Schroeder*

22 **Fearlessness, Faithfulness, and Falsies** — The saints bring us comfort and healing, reminding us of God's promises even through the most difficult times. *Tana M. Kjos*

36 **Divine Geometry** — Being thankful is not what we *do*; being thankful is who we *are*. *Marguerite M. Rourk*

DEPARTMENTS

4 **Voices** — **Holy Comfort** *Kate Sprutta Elliott*

5 **Give Us This Day** — **On Our Sorrow-Path** *Marj Leegard*

10 **Calendar Notes** — **November** *Audrey Novak Riley*

17 **Let Us Pray** — **Unexpected Blessings** *Debra K. Farrington*

26 **Bible Study**
Blessed to Follow: The Beatitudes as a Compass for Discipleship
Session 3: **Blessing in the Country of Mourning**
In this session, we enter the country of mourning with two biblical women as our guides: Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, and Mary, the mother of Jesus. In that place we encounter Jesus and holy comfort. *Martha E. Stortz*

33 **We Recommend** — Resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study.

34 **Health Wise** — **Fend Off the Flu** *Molly M. Ginty*

41 **Grace Notes** — **Remember the Faithful** *Linda Post Bushkofsky*

42 **Amen!** — **Grow Gratitude** *Catherine Malotky*

PLUS . . .

39 **Lutheran Hospitals: Living Out the Diaconal Call** — From humble beginnings, a vast network of Lutheran health care and social service ministries has grown, now including more than 300 organizations. *Audrey Novak Riley*

43 **Directory of Reader Services** — Subscription, editorial, and ordering information.

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Holy Comfort

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

Like most people who have spent time in the country of mourning (as our Bible study writer calls it), I have stories to tell about my travels there. You've heard these kinds of stories before: how we kept watch for hours at a hospital bedside, how we cried ourselves to sleep, the strange dreams and coincidences, the longing to hear someone's voice one more time, the weariness and heartbreak–and then, the cards and phone calls and many kindnesses that make the stress and grief more bearable.

Most of us have traveled that road once or twice and felt the holy comfort of God's presence expressed in the people who supported us. When we return, we find ourselves needing to understand how the journey changed us. A wise friend once told me that if you find yourself "haunted" during your grief, you should record memories of the person you lost and the experiences you shared so they are not forgotten.

This month the Bible study explores the Beatitude "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). Writer Martha Stortz tells us, "In this session, we enter the country of mourning with two biblical women as our guides: Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, and Mary, the mother of Jesus. There we encounter Jesus both as one who mourns and as one who comforts those who mourn through the blessing of his Spirit, the Comforter."

Terri Mork Speirs in "The Shadow of the Valley" tells how her family was comforted through a dark time of stress and grief when her husband wa going through a serious illness. She writes, "When you walk through th valley of the shadow of death, your eye are opened to all the people around you who have also been there. . . who also have traded the small stuff for the bi things like kindness, compassion, an courage."

Those people around you are ofte the saints who make a difference in ou lives. In "Fearlessness, Faithfulness, an Falsies," Tana Kjos tells us, "We fin these saints in Scripture, but we also meet them in our everyday lives. The bring us comfort and healing, remindin us of God's promises even through th most difficult times."

This month we celebrate All Saints Day. Joy Schroeder gives us the back ground story in "All Saints' Day 1517 the day after Martin Luther posted hi 95 Theses on the Castle Church doo We learn what the fuss was about–an how it changed history.

Also this month most of us wi gather with family and friends for th Thanksgiving holiday. In "Divine Geom etry" Pastor Maggie Rourk reminds us "Being thankful is not something we do being thankful is who we are. We ar God's thanksgiving people! It is ou Lord Jesus himself who invites us to hi Thanksgiving Table."

If you are in the country of mourn ing this Thanksgiving, or if you're no may you be blessed with hope.

Kate Sprutta Elliott is editor of *Lutheran Woma Today*. You can write to her at LWT@elca.org.



GIVE US THIS DAY

On Our Sorrow-Path

by Marj Leegard

We walked out of the hospital. There was no reason to stay. Our daughter was dead. I took off my visitor badge and threw it away. Outside, the sun was shining. People were walking and laughing as if everything was the same. But it was not. Everything was different. The hope that had sustained us for the last month was gone.

There was only silence and darkness. The doctor asked if I wanted to see her. All the tubes had been removed. I turned away. She was alive when I last saw her, when the helicopter was waiting to move her to the large hospital. She had smiled and held out her hand, telling me not to cry. I'll be all right, she had said. I had been betrayed. I vowed never to hope again. This was long ago.

Mourning carries elements of denial and anger. It would be lovely if angels always accompanied us on our sorrow-path. If angels wiped away tears and reminded us of our eternal hope. There is a time on the sorrow-walk when we want to rest in strong arms. We place our shaking hands in other hands made strong by the desire to help in our weakness. The helpers were many, but they, too, were mourners.

I read the Beatitudes and a word for my grief was there. "God blesses those people who grieve. They will find comfort" (Matthew 5:4, CEV). The promise is there: Not a reversal of the laws of nature, although God can do that. The promise is resurrection, our own eternal life. But our need for comfort is *now*. And God promises comfort *now*.

When Jesus called his followers, they left their boats and nets. They did not leave them to weather away or slowly sink into the water. I think about the times when boats were needed and there they were, ready to be used for fishing or travel again. It may be that part of mourning is to let go for a while. Let someone else do the fishing for a while.

We are not weak in grief. The strength of the loneliness, the power of the changes in our lives, the intensity of the loss tells us in every minute of the day that our grief has purpose. If this were not so, would Christ have died so that we would wake to eternal life? The immensity of God's love for us becomes apparent in our suffering.

Meanwhile God's blessings are brought in squares of brownies, slices of buttered banana bread, shared tears and shared memories, carefully chosen cards, telephone calls, and little notes.

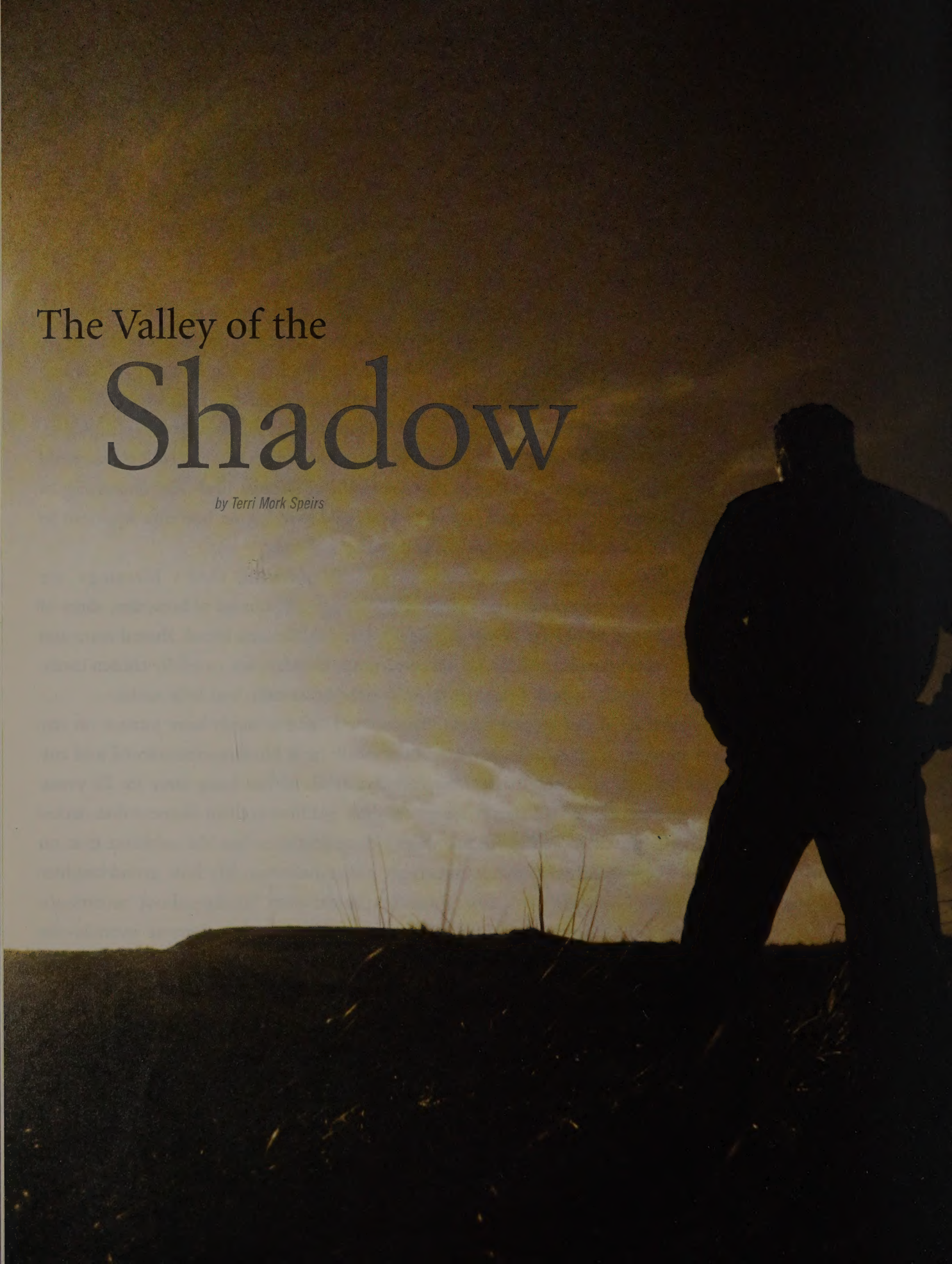
I have a teddy-bear picture on my wall; he is kindergarten-colored and cut-out, but he has hung there for 20 years. It's not his excellent likeness that makes him precious, but the addition that no other bear has. My little granddaughter pinned her Sunday-school attendance reward pin on his green overalls–the most precious thing she had at the moment. And she gave this gift to bring comfort to her grandmother.

Let us be thankful for all the bearers of God's comfort for all God's grieving children on the sorrow-path.

Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.

The Valley of the Shadow

by Terri Mork Speirs



Do you really buy all this stuff about how joy comes in suffering? On the surface it sounds like a Christian spin job. Bad is good. War is peace. The sky is green.

Speaking for myself, I'm buying it. Yes. *Yes.* YES. I believe it with all my heart and soul. Come with me and I'll take you on a little trip around the universe. Let me tell you how the grace of God doubled over the evil that took hold of us.

It all started with Bob's liver. Bob is my husband, and his liver quit working for about six months because of an allergic reaction, it seems, to a simple antibiotic. Meanwhile, the rest of us–two children, ages 7 and 10, and me–found that our own lives quit too, as a failing liver's wild bile poisoned Bob from head to toe.

Exactly what happens when a liver decides to leave? Imagine your living room as a morgue and your husband as its only client. Bob lay in casket position; we were in purgatory.

You should have seen us try to get him to eat. Spoon feeding. Straws.

You should have seen us try to get him to doctor's appointments. Wheelchairs. Blankets.

You should have seen the way the kids could hardly stand to look at him anymore. Egg-yolk eyes. Emaciated daddy.

There were no better days and worse days. Every day merely dropped a few degrees lower than the day before. It was a sweeping, slow, and steady descent into hell. Yet there was also an opposite force of intense holiness.

GRACE AND CHAOS.
BOB AND ME.
FROM OUR CARE
PAGE WEB SITE.
DECEMBER 30, 2006

Early this morning I could tell that Bob was having a bad dream. I tried to wake him. He was stuck in that state where he could hear me but he couldn't move or speak. I could tell he was trying to say something to me, but his mouth was paralyzed. Scared me to death. I almost called 911. "Can you hear me! Who am I! What's my name!"

It's not about having what you want. It's about wanting what you've got. That's what happened to Bob and me during the liver expedition. We decided that we wanted what we had: each other. Our marriage was fine; we were well into our 13th year, and honestly, you just get into a mode where all you are consumed with is the logistics of the kids and the dog days of life. Plus, we were in the midst of Bob's pastoral call process since he had just graduated from seminary. Okay, I admit, that stress was taking a toll. But when you believe that your husband is slowly dying, you realize that nothing else matters but that he lives. Period. Bob's poisoned body seemed to purify our marriage. Not only that, but it cleansed our way of thinking about everyone.

COMFORT AND GRIEF.
THE CARE PAGE.
JANUARY 15, 2007

Did you know that you partied with us tonight? I read your names off to my 7-year-old Aidan for his bedtime reading. Not exactly that I wanted to, but because he insisted. I read each and every name off to him. All 180 or so of you. . . . It was like the party that Aidan's been wanting to have. Like you were all there with us, tucking in. You were the Body of Christ enveloping my baby boy with love and I thank you so much.

On a full-moon night, three months into the lost liver, Bob went to the hospital for the fifth and final time. This time to the Mayo Clinic transplant unit, so very nicely outfitted with computers for the family. That's where I started the care page Web site. It was just words that I spurted out to let everyone know what was going on and for my own release. That Web site became the centerpiece of our survival, as we were otherwise so isolated in our own terror and despair.

A choir of angels is who they were, everyone who logged onto that care page site. Every day I read the names aloud to Bob, which would often prompt us to weep together. Our son, Aidan, became

curious about the list and so I printed it out for him. You can never know how crises play out in the hearts of children, but I can say that he slept with those stapled papers in his bed for about a month. He invented complicated games using all the names, some that he knew, many that he did not. No matter. They were angels.

GRATITUDE AND PANIC.
FAMILY.
DECEMBER 26, 2006

Take deep breaths. Isn't that what you do to avoid panic attacks? To get oxygen to your brain when you simply must remain clear-thinking. Like when your kids are in the back seat of the car and you're driving your husband to the emergency room at 11:30 p.m. An hour and half on the road in the rain. The best thing to do if you feel panic coming on is to pull off at the next exit, open the window, and take deep breaths.

You never want to hold vigil over a dying person. But if you must, then there is absolutely nothing else you would choose to do. As Bob lay in his virtual coma, I sat beside him. For hours. Weeks. Months.

I did nothing else except interact with doctors, nurses, and pharmacists. Yet the household stayed together because of my mother-in-law, also known as Mom Speirs. You might think that she would be frail at age 80. No. While I held vigil in stunned silence, Mom Speirs held vigil while cooking, cleaning, and caretaking. It was an exceptional time for mother and son.

The wandering liver was hard on our families. They all wanted so badly to help, yet my thinking capacity was focused on the demands of Bob's organic bile binder that refused to work.

I couldn't even begin to figure out how to relate to our respective brothers and sisters, to my own parents. I barely talked with Mom Speirs, who lived with us.

It took me about three months to remember that my brother Tom is a Mayo Clinic paramedic. One night I almost ignored his phone call, too. Thank God I answered, because that was the night Tom came to get Bob. That was the night we drove Bob to the Mayo Clinic emergency room. That was the night I came to know how magnificent it is to have a brother. To have family.

HOLINESS AND HELL.
SPIRIT.
JANUARY 12, 2007

Depression is a nasty evil, with all the dark thoughts it can plant into your mind. It's like those "friends" in the book of Job who kept telling Job all the things he had done wrong and how he had brought on his afflictions by his own doing. At 3:00 o'clock this morning we ordered Satan to get out of here.

This is the part where we go around the universe, because our apartment seemed to be open space for spirits, bad and good. And I beg you to understand that I am not prone to such notions. It just happened. When I realized that the doctors didn't know what to do, I started to consider the spiritual aspect of the liver mystery. It felt as though a demon had walked in our front door and settled right into Bob's core. I didn't know exactly what to do with that except to keep the neighbor kids out.

Many nights I called aloud on the authority of Jesus Christ. Just after the liver had resolved, about 30 or so friends came into our home with a "spiritual housekeeping" service. Our daughter, Amanda, imagined that people were coming with vacuum cleaners. In a way, yes. They ordered the evil to be gone with hymns and prayers and bread and wine.

As I puttered around the kitchen late one night, Bob's father came to me. I'd never met him because he had gone to glory some 30 years earlier. He simply wanted to offer reassurance that everything was going to be all right. Another night I woke up in utter anguish over my cousin who had died in eighth grade from a brain tumor. Waves of grief washed over me. It had been almost 14 years, and all of a sudden, I felt a bond to her I had never felt before.

JOY AND SUFFERING.
COMMUNITY.
DECEMBER 08, 2006

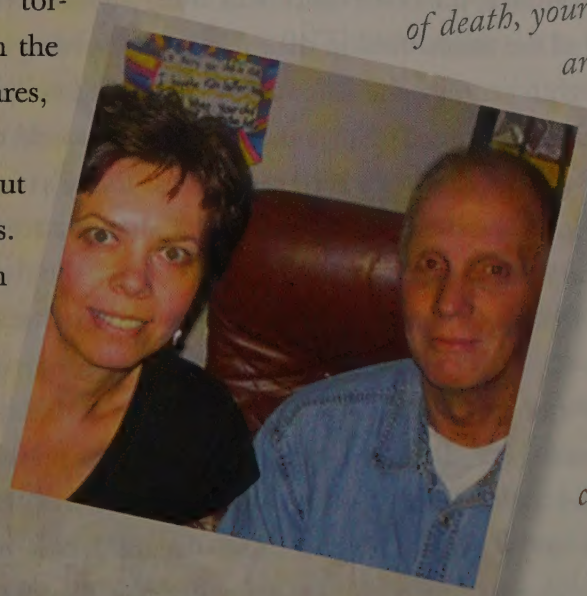
Ministry of dirty clothes. This morning my good friend and extremely talented colleague, Joanne, picked up our laundry. She will return it washed and pressed very soon. This is the fifth week she's done that. When Joanne first suggested that she handle our dirty clothes, I flat out said no way! At the time I was still trying to keep some sort of dignity. And we have kids with "special" laundry issues.

How can I tell you about the community who rallied around us? And it was not due to my sterling personality, because I put signs up on our door to stay away. I did not answer the phone. I had the look of death on my face that said "don't talk to me." I ignored my children. All I could think of was getting Bob through his lack-o'-liver torture du jour–itching from the inside, starvation, nightmares, retching, despair.

And yet it was all about abundance. Food. Letters. Prayer shawls. Gifts from strangers. Bake sales. Second-grade poems. A Christmas tree. A spectacular benefit dinner. Fervent intercession by dear neighbors who come from different countries with their blessed different senses of personal boundaries during illness. I wish I had every page in this magazine to tell you about the actions that people took on our behalf. People from every church that we had ever attended. Some churches that didn't know us at all. My family. Bob's family. The Luther Seminary community. My colleagues at Lutheran World Relief. Bob's youth groups. Amanda and Aidan's elementary school.

Why? We don't know. It is beyond our understanding why people responded to Bob's diva liver in this way. Like the grace of God, it just came to us in spite of us.

Terri Mork Speirs lives in St. Paul, Minn., with her husband, his liver, and their two children. She works with Lutheran World Relief. And she writes about our planet, transplant, and transformation on her blog, rollingontheliver.blogspot.com.



Dear Readers,

This is where the joy part comes in, because as long as we live we will hold with us the love that came when Bob's liver went. We no longer easily see the part of humanity that is flawed. We see the divine, God incarnate, all around us. When you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, your eyes are opened to all the people around you who have also been there. Who are presently there. And who also have traded the small stuff for the big things like kindness, compassion, and courage. The treatment for an injured liver is time or transplant. Bob's liver chose six months. Transformation chose us.

Terri



CALENDAR NOTES

November

compiled by Audrey Novak Riley from sources including Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Sundays and Seasons, *and* Lutheran Book of Worship, *published by Augsburg Fortress, Publishers (www.augsburgfortress.org)*

Our ancestors in faith saw in nature's turn toward the winter darkness a reminder of the Christian mystery of death and judgment, as we repeat in the Creed: "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end." The texts appointed for proclamation in worship this month bring us face to face with what we look forward to: "the life of the world to come."

The church's calendar this month also lifts up several heroes of the faith who carried out Christ's call to serve even the least of his brothers and sisters by caring for the sick and the suffering (Matthew 25:34–40). That holy work goes on today; see page 39 for more on Lutheran hospitals.

1 All Saints' Day

This feast goes back to at least the third century, when Christians observed a day honoring all the martyrs. Later, in the seventh century, the observance was extended to all the saints. And in the middle of the eighth century, the date of the commemoration was set as November 1. (See page 18 for the story of a certain All Saints' Day in Wittenberg.) Today, many churches honor all the saints on the first Sunday of November.

3 Martin de Porres, renewer of society

The illegitimate son of a Spanish soldier and a former slave, young Martin was apprenticed to a barber-surgeon and learned the care of the sick. As a lay brother in a Dominican priory in Lima, Peru, he was assigned to the infirmary where he cared for the sick with skill, patience, and tenderness. When an epidemic swept Lima, the infirmary was filled not only with stricken members of the priory but with sick neighbors. Brother Martin brought in for care. The superior, fearing contagion, ordered him to stop bringing in outsiders. The next day Martin found a poor Indian bleeding on the street and took him in. The superior reproved Martin for his disobedience, but Martin replied, "Forgive my error and please instruct me; I did not know that the precept of obedience took precedence over that of charity." He died on this date in 1639. When did Brother Martin see you hurt and alone, Lord?

4 All Saints' Sunday

The great thanksgiving prayer says "With all the choirs of angels, with all the faithful of every time and every place we praise your name and join their unending hymn." Today we remember with thanksgiving all those who have lived and died in the faith, the saints known to all the world and those known only to us. Today's texts are Daniel 7:1–3,15–18; Ephesians 1:11–23; Luke 6:20–31.

4 Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 31

Most congregations will observe All Saints' Sunday today, but the lectionary offers us texts for the Sunday after Pentecost as well: Isaiah 1:10–18; 2 Thessalonians 1:1–4, 11–12; Luke 19:1–10. Jesus visits Zacchaeus' house, even though Zacchaeus certainly deserves no such

honor. Do we? And yet the risen Christ is in our midst.

11 Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 32

In today's second reading, Paul tells us not to be "shaken in mind" by wild talk about the end times, but to "hold fast" to what we've been taught. Wise words. Job 19:23–27a; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–5, 13–17; Luke 20:27–38.

11 Martin of Tours, bishop

One cold winter day in about the year 335, a young officer in an elite cavalry unit of the Roman army was on duty in northern France. At the gates of the city he saw a beggar wearing only scanty rags. He impulsively drew his sword, cut his own warm uniform cloak in half, and shared it with the poor man. That night, he dreamed he saw Christ wrapped in the cloak and heard him say to his angels, "Here is Martin, the Roman soldier who is not yet baptized; he clad me." When did the soldier Martin see you shivering with cold, Lord?

An old custom is to name a baby after the saint on whose day the baptism occurs. Martin Luther was baptized on this day in 1483, the day after his birth in Eisleben.

17 Elizabeth of Hungary, renewer of society

At the age of four, this princess was sent to Wartburg Castle to be brought up in the luxurious court of the Thuringian royal family and eventually marry the prince. Elizabeth grew up to be a devout young woman, and her beloved Ludwig defended her against the sneers of the more frivolous members of the court. When famine and sickness ravaged the countryside, she built a hospital at the base of the mountain below the castle and visited the patients every day.

After Ludwig's death on crusade, Elizabeth spent the rest of her short life building hospitals and caring for the sick. She died on this date in 1231. When did Princess Elizabeth see you hungry and suffering, Lord?

18 Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 33

Today's texts give us signs of the end time. What are we to do in the time between Christ's ascension and his return? See the last line of the second reading. Malachi 4:1–2a; 2 Thessalonians 3:6–13; Luke 21:5–19.

22 Thanksgiving Day (U.S.A.)

Today we gather together to give God thanks for all the blessings we have received. Is it a coincidence that the word for the sacrament of Christ's presence among us and within us, *eucharist*, means "thanksgiving"? The texts appointed for Thanksgiving Day are Deuteronomy 26:1–11; Philippians 4:4–9; John 6:25–35.

24 Justus Falckner, Jehu Jones, William Passavant, pastors

William Passavant opened a small hospital in the Pittsburgh area in 1849, and then went on to found hospitals, orphanages, homes for the mentally ill, and other benevolent institutions from East Coast to Midwest. From his dedicated work grew Lutheran Services in America, which currently serves more than 6 million people each year. See "Lutheran Hospitals: Living Out the Diaconal Call" on page 39. He died in 1894 and his son carried on his work. When did Pastor Passavant see you sick and in need, Lord?

25 Christ the King

On the last Sunday of the church's year, we honor Christ the King, who reigns not from a jeweled throne but from a rough wooden cross. The second reading is an early Christian hymn praising Christ as the king who reigns in heaven and on earth. Today's texts are Jeremiah 23:1–6; Colossians 1:11–20; Luke 23:33–43.

30 Andrew, apostle

This fisherman was the first disciple Jesus called. All through the Gospels Andrew keeps bringing people to meet Jesus, beginning with his own brother, Simon Peter. We can do the same. Today's texts are Ezekiel 3:16–21; Romans 10:10–18; John 1:35–42.



by Emily Bauska

AN OASIS IN THE DESERT

Al, his wife, and their two small children immigrated to the United States from the islands of Chuuk in Micronesia seeking better economic opportunities than their tiny island nation in the southwestern Pacific Ocean could offer. However, after both Al and his wife were laid off from their jobs in this country, the family found themselves homeless and adrift. Fortunately, Al landed at the More Blue Sky Center, a place of service and sanctuary for refugees and first-generation immigrants in Salt Lake City, Utah. The More Blue Sky Center is a 2007 Women of the ELCA Grant recipient.

When Al came in, "immediately people began pulling up the [location of his] island on the computers," said Leslie Whited Vance, director of Lutheran Social Service of Utah. He was greeted by Maryam and José Bonilla, who often perform and teach music at the center. A few days later, Al and his family shared music from their homeland with Maryam and José. They also received resources for finding housing and jobs. This balance, serving both spiritual and practical needs of immigrants and refugees, makes the More Blue Sky Center unique.

A service of Lutheran Social Service of Utah, the More Blue Sky Center welcomes people referred to them by churches and agencies that serve the homeless and the unemployed. The center has assisted people from all over the world, including Bosnia, Sudan, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.

For many immigrants and refugees, arrival in the United States is not the end of the struggle. They are often in culture-shock and left to fend for themselves in complicated health care, housing, and citizenship systems. The center provides access to computers and help with writing resumes and finding housing and work. People can receive bus passes and vouchers for new clothing, shoes, and haircuts.

The computers at the center are equipped with English-learning software that translates to and from 60 languages. The center also teams with Lutheran Social Service to provide translators for some guests. The comfort of being understood in their own languages is critical in helping refugees and immigrants feel loved and valued.

"What I am finding is that the phrase 'the last shall be first' is not somewhere way off in the future, but can happen among us now," Leslie said.

As well as serving the practical needs of immigrants and refugees, the center is also a place where they can see or do something that inspires them. There are opportunities for people to engage in art and other forms of creative expression. "We are here to provide whatever is needed," said Maryam, who described the center as "an oasis in the desert." Beautiful art adorns the walls of the center, much of it produced by immigrants and refugees.

"It still takes my own breath away some days when I walk into the center," Leslie said. Lutheran Social Service has recently opened the World of Arts Shoppe where immigrants and refugees may sell their art and music. Art and music classes taught by local artists are also offered at the Shoppe.

"Happiness is contagious," said José. He said that with his music, he hopes to create an atmosphere at the More Blue Sky Center where no one can be sad. An immigrant himself, José fled civil war in Guatemala 26 years ago.

The center is filled with people who understand the struggles of refugees and immigrants because they experienced the same hardships. Amal Mohamed, a former director of the center, is a refugee from Sudan. While working at the center, she completed her G.E.D. Now she is attending Salt Lake City Community College. Anab Awale, the center's newest intern, uses her job to support her two teenagers. She fled Somalia and spent more than six years as a refugee in Egypt before finally arriving in the United States. Leslie said that even though Anab is just beginning to learn English, she makes connections with visitors to the center through her wisdom, compassion, and creativity.

"The More Blue Sky Center is intended to affirm each person and a whole community," said Leslie, "It is a place where you are loved," she said, "where you can find your own footing with support all around you."

Women of the ELCA Grants

Your gifts to the grants program made it possible to award $87,200 to 29 domestic and 12 international programs this year, all dedicated to raising up healthy women and girls.

This triennium, the Women of the ELCA grants are awarded to programs that support healing and wholeness for women of all ages through the affirmation and advancement of women's emotional, physical, and spiritual health. See www.womenoftheelca.org/whatwedo/grants.html for more detailed information, including instructions on writing a grant proposal. Proposals will be accepted between December 15, 2007, and February 15, 2008.

Emily Bauska was an intern with the communications team of Women of the ELCA this summer.

How you can HELP

Through your generosity, Women of the ELCA has provided nearly $3 million in grants to more that 700 recipient organizations since 1988, making a positive difference in the lives of the people these organizations serve. Each year, the need and the requests for assistance increase.

You can help Women of the ELCA continue to support programs and ministries that work to improve women's emotional, physical, and spiritual health. To give to the grants fund, send your check, made payable to Women of the ELCA Grants Program No. 528, to Women of the ELCA, 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago IL 60631. Or you may use your credit card to contribute on-line to other Women of the ELCA programs at www.womenoftheelca.org/giving_basket.html. You can also purchase a Lucinda Pin (www.womenoftheelca.org/whatwedo/grants.html), which helps support our grants program.

The recipients of Women of the ELCA grants thank you!

Women of the ELCA

SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

by Terri Lackey

SUPPORT ONE ANOTHER IN OUR CALLINGS

The purpose statement of Women of the ELCA encourages us to "support one another in our callings." And that's just what you've done for Ruth Ann Sipe, recipient of a 2007–2008 Chilstrom Fund Scholarship for ordained ministry.

Sipe, a Women of the ELCA participant since the organization's founding, is completing her master of divinity degree at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina. And she largely has the North Carolina Women of the ELCA (and God) to thank for it. She is a member of Well of Hope Lutheran Church in Pineville, North Carolina, and a participant in that congregational unit.

In 1994, Sipe returned to college full time–at about the same time as her two children–to finish the bachelor's degree that she had worked on over the years. "As I neared completion of my college degree, I found myself asking God what I should do with the rest of my life, and I began to hear the call to ordained ministry," she said. "One of the times I clearly heard this call was while attending a Women of the ELCA retreat."

The North Carolina Women of the ELCA provided Sipe with support along her journey, she said, with scholarships, encouragement, recommendation letters, and most important, prayer.

Sipe's husband, Ray, is also a master of divinity candidate at Lutheran Southern, she said, "So you can well imagine that financial assistance is both a necessity and a real blessing!"

Sipe assured the scholarship application committee that the investment in her would not be a new one. "Women of the ELCA has already invested significantly in my development as a leader and mentor for other women, my understanding and ability to take action on social justice issues, my faith journey, and even my willingness to answer God's call to ministry."

Before leaving for seminary in South Carolina, Sipe had been active in her congregational unit since "the formation of Women of the ELCA." She served in leadership roles beyond her congregation–as conference leader, synodical board member, newsletter editor, and delegate to the churchwide triennial convention. She has attended many gatherings, retreats, and Women of the ELCA studies in a variety of settings, she said.

"These experiences have been a significant part of my discernment of God's call and will have a tremendous impact on my future ministry," she said.

Thanks to your contributions, 24 women ages 23 to 59 received a total of $24,375 through six scholarship categories. The scholarship program is just one way Women of the ELCA carries out its purpose statement to affirm and support women's gifts and growth.

The scholarships support a diverse group of women, including second-career students, seminarians, female college faculty, and professional women on the road to career advancement.

Various fields of study are represented, such as lay ministry, ordination, child development, social

work, health sciences, and teaching. Some scholarship recipients are in their undergraduate work, others will attend their final year of seminary, and some graduated from high school 10 or more years ago and are just now beginning their higher education.

Women selected for scholarships are age 21 or over and represent every region in the ELCA, according to Emily Hansen, associate for programs, Women of the ELCA. Many live and work in extraordinary circumstances as they pursue their educational and career goals.

Recipients in the Chilstrom Ordination Scholarship reached a historic goal, Hansen said. "This is the first year that our Chilstrom recipients each came from a different ELCA seminary."

Terri Lackey is managing editor of *Lutheran Woman Today.*

2007-2008 Scholarship Recipients by Fund and Synodical Region

Ordained Ministry Scholarship
supported by the Chilstrom Fund. Assists women who are second-career students at ELCA seminaries preparing for ordained ministry in ELCA congregations.

Nadia Bolz-Weber (2E)
Longmont, Colo. / Luther Seminary

Miriam Schmidt (1D)
Philadelphia, Pa. / Lutheran Seminary at Philadelphia

Christie E. Manisto (3E)
Cloquet, Minn. / Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Ruth Ann Sipe (9B)
Mobile, Ala. / Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary

Administrative Leadership Scholarship
supported by the Arne Fund. Provides assistance to women interested in reaching the top of their field as an administrator.

Michelle Marquardt (3I)
Rochester, Minn. / Medicine Administration, Mayo Clinic Medical School

Academic Leadership Scholarship
supported by the Schmieder Fund. Assists in the development of senior women faculty or staff leadership at ELCA colleges and seminaries in the United States by attending a summer leadership institute.

Dr. Mary Hinkle Shore (3H)
Associate Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary St. Paul, Minn. / Harvard Management Development Institute

Karen L. Younger (3C)
Professor of Nursing / Augustana College, Sioux Falls, S.D./ HERS Management Institute at the University of Denver

Laywomen Opportunity Scholarship
supported by the Drinkhall Franke/Seeley Knudstrup Scholarship Fund. Assists mature ELCA laywomen preparing for an occupation in Christian service though a graduate course of study.

Elizabeth A. Vega (7E)
Allentown, Pa. / Pastoral Counseling, Moravian Theological Seminary

Laywomen Opportunity Scholarship
supported by the Amelia Kemp Fund. Assists mature ELCA women of color in undergraduate, graduate, professional, or vocational courses of study.

Erin Werner (1E)
Bend, Ore. / Education, George Fox University

Laywomen Opportunity Scholarships
supported by Cronk, First Triennium Board, General, Mehring, Paepke, Piero/Wade and Edwin/Edna Robeck Funds. Assists ELCA laywomen in undergraduate, graduate, professional, or vocational studies.

Michelle C. Brekhus (1B)
Stanwood, Wash. / Missiology (mission and evangelism), Regent University

Kathleen Brighton (5C)
Lauderdale, Minn. / Congregational and Community Care, Luther Seminary

Tamara L. Duke (2B)
Mecca, Calif. / Liberal Studies, California State San Bernadino

Sara Garness (3H)
Stillwater, Minn. / Radiography, College of St. Catherine

Lynn Gorski (5A)
Palatine, Ill. / Health Information Technology, Devry University

Lisa Gwin (6E)
Dalton, Ohio / Literacy, Ashland University

Linda A. Keller (7F)
Quakertown, Pa. / Special Education, Kutztown University

Rebecca M. Kerr (9D)
Winterville, Ga. / Diagnostic Medical Sonography, Athens Technical College

Mary Mamet (8D)
Hanover, Pa. / Elementary Education, Wilson College

Sandra Ohlen (3C)
Rapid City, S.D. / Spiritual Formation, Center for Spirituality at Work

Iva B. Schultz (3B)
Wanpeton, N.D. / Religion, Augsburg College

Louise C. Stenberg (9B)
Chapel Hill, N.C. / Health Behavior and Education, University of North Carolina

Bonita Stevens (3E)
Breezy Point, Minn. / Medical Coding, North Dakota State College of Science

Jana Stewart (4D)
Arlington, Texas / Nursing, University of Texas, Arlington

Roberta J. Vincent (6D)
Crestline, Ohio / Nursing, MedCentral College of Nursing



WOMEN OF THE ELCA ARE INVESTING IN THE HEALTH OF WOMEN, GIRLS, AND THE CHURCH.

As a participant in Women of the ELCA, you're helping raise up healthy women and girls. But did you know that by putting your money into the ELCA Mission Investment Fund, you can raise up new churches?

When you invest in the Mission Investment Fund, you'll receive competitive interest rates and convenient services. MIF then uses investors' money to make loans to build new churches and renovate existing ones.

And now you have 1,000 opportunities to make even more of a difference. MIF is challenging Women of the ELCA to open 1,000 new individual Mission Investment Fund accounts by June 30, 2008. If that goal is met, MIF will sponsor a major event at the 2008 Triennial Gathering in Salt Lake City.

Download an application at ***www.missioninvestmentfund.org,*** call MIF toll free at 877.886.3522, or send an e-mail to *mif@elca.org*. And make an investment that pays off for everyone involved.

www.womenoftheelca.org
800.638.3522, ext. 2730

www.missioninvestmentfund.org
877.886.3522

MISSION INVESTMENT FUND OF THE ELCA



LET US PRAY

Unexpected Blessings

by Debra K. Farrington

He died on December 30. Sheyden (the name means "blessed one") was our diabetic cat. The rescue group I volunteer with had asked us to foster him, and we loved him so much we adopted him ourselves. We knew that his diabetes was severe and that we might not be able to help him for long. Sheyden lasted only six months, but he brought us great joy during that time. We miss him.

Caring for Sheyden brought me another unexpected blessing. His last month was one long series of visits to the vet's office for tests and emergency hydration. When we realized that his body was so ravaged by years of uncontrolled diabetes that medical care wasn't going to help, we learned how to give him fluids at home to spare him the stress of travel. When Sheyden stopped eating and grew lethargic, we knew the end was near. We sat with him that last day and night, prayed over him, and petted him. He purred until his last hour and slipped quietly away after midnight.

In the midst of mourning him, I began to get a clearer sense of a call that had been whispering to me for some time. During the months I cared for Sheyden, I had begun to wonder if God wasn't inviting me to take a new direction. Was I being called to care for animals? To help people learn about and care for their pets? Friends and family members, and even the staff at the vet's office, thought so. But it was only during the vulnerability of mourning that my ears were opened to hear what I might have missed in my ordinarily busy and crowded schedule.

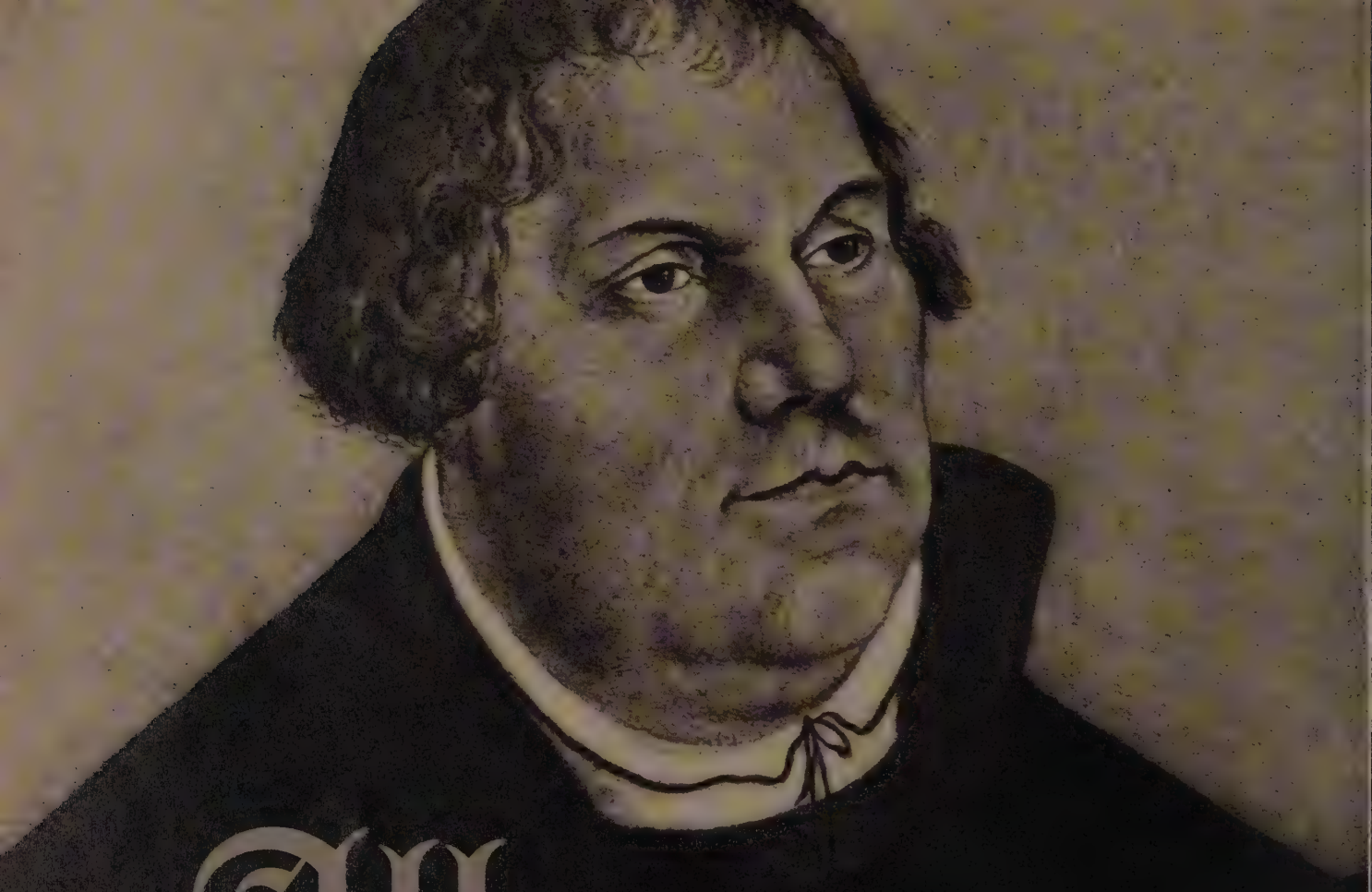
My experience isn't unique; many of us are more open to God's hopes, dreams, and comfort in times of grief or pain or uncertainty. That doesn't mean that God visits misery on us in order to make us hear better. I suspect, instead, that when our defenses are lowered we are simply better able to hear what God is saying to us. So often, in the midst of our own deserts, we, like the Israelites in Exodus, focus on our fears. Like the Israelites, we want to go back to what we had or knew before. Even at the edge of Canaan, the people were afraid of what God was offering them, rather than looking ahead to the new possibilities, along with Joshua and Caleb.

There is a time for mourning, when we need to focus only on that. There also comes a time when God invites us to imagine what might be ahead. For me, that's meant starting a whole new career. Your own road may lead to large or small changes. But God waits for each of us, as with the Israelites, at the gate of some new Canaan, waiting only for us to accept the blessing and enter.

Debra K. Farrington has written eight books of Christian spirituality. Check out her Web site at www.debrafarrington.com.

Resource

If you are living in the midst of mourning or transition, you may find my book, *The Seasons of a Restless Heart: A Spiritual Companion for Living in Transition* (Jossey Bass), to be helpful.



TRAVELING BACK IN TIME

All Saints' Day 1517

by Jay A. Schroeder

It is All Saints' Day, November 1, 1517, in Wittenberg, Germany. This day commemorates the saints who dwell in heaven with God. Crowds fill the unpaved street that leads to the castle's All Saints' Church. Visitors wrinkle their noses at the lingering smell of garbage and sewage—a never-ending problem in 16th-century Europe (a problem that especially plagued Wittenberg). Apart from the castle and two churches, the town is fairly unimpressive. Most of Wittenberg's 2,500 inhabitants live in squat wooden houses or thatched mud cottages. Yet today, the little town has an air of festivity.

Some pilgrims are eager to see the church for the first time. Completed eight years earlier, All Saints' Church–built as a wing of the Wittenberg castle–is a stately structure with high vaulted ceilings. Visitors looked forward to seeing new paintings in the style we now call Renaissance, hearing the sweet chanting of the choirboys, giving offerings, praying at one of the church's 19 side altars, and lighting candles. (According to church records, worshipers burned a total of 40,932 candles in 1517!)

All Saints' Church, more commonly referred to now as the Castle Church, was a special project of the Elector-Prince of Saxony Frederick the Wise. (He was called "elector" because he was one of seven men–four princes and three bishops–charged with electing the Holy Roman Emperor to a lifetime term.) Frederick had hired painters, carvers, metalworkers, and other artisans to make the Castle Church splendid. But the most priceless treasure at All Saints' was its collection of relics.

What the fuss was about

All Saints' Church possessed an astounding number of relics–19,013 of them, filling nine crowded aisles in the church's gallery. Relics were displayed in impressive containers, or reliquaries, made of gold and other precious metals. Deeply devoted to the saints, Frederick had greatly expanded the collection. (He had even acquired St. Anne's thumb on his travels.) The collection is said to have included barbs from Jesus' crown of thorns, five drops of the Virgin Mary's milk, straw from baby Jesus' manger, part of his diaper, a twig from Moses' burning bush, and several dozen pieces of Christ's cross. (See more about relics on page 21.)

Visitors were eager to see the collection of relics not simply because they were interesting, but because venerating the relics there on All Saints' Day carried a great spiritual benefit: a plenary indulgence.

"Indulgence" didn't mean chocolate

In the spring, when the Castle Church opened its gallery and collection for public view on the second Monday after Easter, Christians viewing the relics there were promised an indulgence of 100 days for each relic (relief from 100 days in purgatory). A Christian venerating all 19,013 relics was assured release from more than 52,000 years in purgatory!

But in the fall, there was an even more valuable indulgence offered at the Castle Church, a rare and special plenary (full) indulgence offered every October 31 and November 1. This plenary indulgence was said to release a living person from all the purgatorial suffering accumulated since baptism. (It did not apply to future sins.) Plenary indulgences could also be applied to souls already in purgatory, allowing the suffering souls to enter heaven immediately. All a pilgrim had to do to earn the plenary indulgence was make a full confession to one of the priests specially appointed for the task and then venerate the relics. The Castle Church's plenary indulgence always drew a crowd. (See more about indulgences and purgatory on page 21.)

However, in 1517, Frederick feared that the crowds and the offerings flowing to his Castle Church would be fewer because of a new indulgence offered for sale in a town 22 miles away across the territorial border. The proceeds of this new indulgence, publicized by the Pope and the Archbishop of Mainz, would help build the ornate Basilica of St. Peter in Rome. The archbishop had even brought in a team of friars to promote the new indulgence aggressively. From Frederick's perspective, that was cause for concern.

Frederick had barred the sale of the St. Peter's Basilica indulgence in his territory of Saxony. The money that Germans spent on the St. Peter's indulgence would flow into Italy rather than helping the local economy. In contrast, the voluntary offerings collected at the Castle Church supported some excellent local causes, including Frederick's newly established University of Wittenberg.

Martin Luther and 95 Theses

Frederick wasn't the only one who was concerned about the indulgence offered for sale outside Saxony. Dr. Martin Luther, a monk serving as the university's professor of biblical studies, had just written a set of 95 theses (academic debate propositions) on the topic of indulgences.

On October 31, provoked by the St. Peter's indulgence and the questionable way it was promoted, Luther wrote a letter to the Archbishop of Mainz and enclosed his 95 Theses. According to tradition, Luther posted the 95 Theses on the north door of the Castle Church on the same day. (It is quite possible that Luther did tack a placard with the 95 Theses to the church door, since this was the customary place for members of the university to post theses and invitations to academic disputations. However, some scholars now debate whether the theses were actually posted on October 31.)

The audience for the 95 Theses was not the crowds of people gathering at the Castle Church, most of whom were illiterate. The theses were written in Latin, intended for an academic readership. Some of the wording was technical, dealing with theological distinctions incomprehensible to the ordinary townsperson or peasant. Yet some parts of Luther's document would strike a chord: "Christians are to be taught that one who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than one who buys indulgences." And, "They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory"—almost directly quoting the energetic salesman at work over the border.

Though he was not yet world-famous, Luther was already well-known to the townspeople of Wittenberg, for he had served as their parish preacher at St. Mary's, across the market square from the castle, for the last four years. Lately his sermons had questioned the veneration of the saints. Only a year earlier, he had raised concerns about the indulgences available at the Castle Church. While Luther's criticisms offended some townspeople (including Elector Frederick), others were curious to find out what he had to say about the St. Peter's indulgences.

Within two months, aided by the printing press, German translations of the 95 Theses were available to eager readers throughout Saxony and beyond.

Many changes would be coming to Wittenberg, including a readable new German translation of the Bible, the marriage of clergy, and more. The priceless relics would be removed from display in 1523. After Frederick's death in 1525, his successor John would destroy the relics and melt down the reliquaries for their precious metals.

All of this was yet to come, however. As our crowd enters the Castle Church, some people are penitent, pondering their numerous sins in preparation for confession. Many are relieved that their souls will be freed from the years in purgatory they had accumulated.

Others in the crowd are joyous and hopeful, knowing that their devout prayers and the All Saints' indulgence would release departed loved ones from purgatorial anguish. Today Mama or Papa would enter heaven! However, in the minds of some, there might be doubt, as they remembered the words of their parish preacher, Martin Luther. They knew he was a wise and holy man who thought deeply about such things. Maybe the promises the archbishop's salesman made about indulgences really were true, but then again, maybe they weren't. Maybe the parish preacher and university teacher was right after all.

The Rev. Dr. Joy A. Schroeder serves as associate professor of religion at Capital University and associate professor of church history at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, in Columbus, Ohio. She is the author of *Dinah's Lament: The Biblical Legacy of Sexual Violence in Christian Interpretation* (Fortress Press, 2007) and many articles about women in church history.

What are relics?

Relics are objects associated with Christ and the saints. These could range from a chip of bone from the body of a saint to bits of the Virgin Mary's clothing and even items used in Christ's passion. Objects that had been touched or used by holy people were also regarded as powerful (as in Acts 19:11–12, where cloths touched by St. Paul had healing properties). People believed that even though saints' souls were in heaven, they still had some awareness of their bodies. Thus people praying before the thumb of St. Anne, Jesus' grandmother, at the Castle Church felt more certain that this holy lady would hear their prayers and offer her own prayers of intercession on their behalf. The practice of venerating relics may be as old as the third century.

But were these chips of bone, bits of cloth, and splinters of wood really what they were said to be? Some might have been. But the medieval practice of buying and selling relics–sometimes for astonishing sums–was a certain temptation to fraud. King Louis IX of France paid 10,000 silver marks in about 1250 for what he believed was the crown of thorns. Other inauthentic relics were the result of pious misunderstandings and a lively souvenir trade in the Holy Land. For instance, many pilgrims brought home souvenir replicas of the nails used for the crucifixion. Decades later, pilgrims' descendants might believe that their great-grandmother or grandfather brought home the actual nails!

It is important to note that the Roman Catholic church has never taught its members to worship Mary, the saints, or their relics. Christians might venerate (love and respect) the saints, but not worship them; worship must be offered to God alone. However, it was believed that the saints in heaven pray to God for believers still on earth. The church taught that, just as a living brother or sister in Christ might pray for us, the saints in heaven continue to keep fellow Christians in their prayers.

About purgatory and indulgences

According the theory of purgatory, Christians are forgiven their sins through confession and absolution. However, they still needed to perform some penance (such as prayers, pilgrimages, or service to the poor) before their souls were ready to be admitted into the holy presence of God. But since even a lifetime of good works was not sufficient to offset ordinary Christians' accumulated penances, they were still subject to a period of purification before entering heaven–purgatory.

One of the ways that the soul's term in purgatory could be shortened was through indulgences. The merits accumulated by the good works of Christ and the saints were viewed as a sort of treasury or storehouse that the church could open and grant to individuals, both living and dead. And the medieval church had drawn up an elaborate "quantification" of purgatory: so many days in purgatory for this sort of sin, so many days of indulgence for that kind of good work.

This system was ripe for abuses, and the sale of indulgences was one of them. For instance, the decree announcing the St. Peter's indulgence said that people buying the indulgence must be "contrite in heart," go to confession, or "at least have the intention of confessing at a suitable time." In other words, there was a sort of "loophole" permitting one simply to intend to confess one's sins. One of Martin Luther's objections to the sale of the St. Peter's indulgence was that some people interpreted this to mean that no penitence was required of the sinner. No confession, no absolution, no penance–just money.



fearlessness, faithfulness and falsies

how the saints help shape our lives

by Tana M. Kjos

Creedal references to the "communion of saints" aside, from my perspective growing up in a Lutheran household, the saints distinguished us from the Roman Catholic side of the family. They had them; we didn't. It was nearly three decades before I really came to understand and appreciate the role of the saints in my own life. And it happened, of all places, in a synodical candidacy committee interview.

A candidacy committee is the group assigned to help people steer their way through the process of becoming professional church leaders. One day my committee asked me a question that, at first, struck me as particularly odd: "What does the Bible mean to you?" I wasn't sure what they were looking for. I'm a Lutheran, after all. *Sola scriptura* and all that! I'm afraid I didn't give a very academic answer. Instead, I just dove in with the first response that came into my head. I reached into my bag and took out the Bible I had been using for the last few years, the one I had to replace soon after that meeting, in fact, because it was beginning to fall apart. The leather was so worn it would flake off, sticking to my hands and then to my face if that happened to be the next thing I touched. "The Bible?" I said. "This Bible is my story. And these stories, written so long ago, are my stories. The people in this story have shaped me. These people *are* me."

That conversation has bounced around in my head over the years. I now realize that what I was talking about were the saints–the central role they play in my life, and their importance in a life of faith. We find these saints in Scripture, but we also meet them in our everyday lives. These saints shape us, reminding us of who we are and who we belong to. They bring us comfort and healing, reminding us of God's promises even through the most difficult times. They gently nudge us and sometimes even give us the kick we need to remember that our purpose, as people of faith, is to participate in God's mission to love and bless the world.

We Are Shaped by Their Stories . . . If We Dare

Do we dare let the stories of the saints shape us? How about the saints we meet hanging out with Jesus in the ninth chapter of Luke? They don't actually look much like what you'd think a saint should look like. For starters, they're so whiny! They've heard Jesus speak about the kingdom of God. They've been welcomed, healed, and loved. They have been fed by the word of God. Then what do they do? When it comes time for dinner, they tell Jesus to send the crowd away to fend for themselves. "We're here in a deserted place," they complain. "We don't have anything to give them." Jesus doesn't skip a beat. "*You* feed them," he says. And that's the point. Jesus is at work in the world, today and always, through people like you and me. Through those whiny saints, Jesus changed the lives of thousands that day. Jesus can do the same through us, too.

How about the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in the eighth chapter of Acts? What would it look like to be shaped by these unorthodox saints? Philip finds himself in the company of a man who could not be more different from him. And this Ethiopian wants to hear about Jesus. And once Philip tells him the story, the man boldly says, "Baptize me!" Knowing full well that the religious authorities–on the basis of biblical law–would not approve, Philip trusts the Holy Spirit and does what he believes Jesus would want him to do. He baptizes this stranger–an uncircumcised Gentile, sexually ambiguous, from a faraway land, filthy rich, foreign in every way–right then and there. The Ethiopian is changed by this encounter with Philip. Philip himself is changed. And their model of doing the faithful thing, even if it is unorthodox, has the potential of changing us, too.

These days I wish we were being shaped more profoundly by two of my favorite saints: the apostle Paul and the reformer Martin Luther. These guys both had reason to live in fear. There was a price on Luther's head and Paul was hounded by the threat of imprisonment and death. Yet both lived in the freedom that comes through Jesus Christ . . . and called on us to do the same. How desperately we need to hear this message today!

As I travel around the country these days, I am confronted over and over again by the Homeland Security announcement that we are on orange alert. The real message is that red alert (or something worse) can't be far behind.

And so we take off our shoes. We send our luggage through X-ray machines. Overhead TV monitors show us the latest storm front or other disasters in the making we need to be freaked out about. And it doesn't end there. Fear has seeped into nearly every area of our lives, from world news and job security to the health of our congregations and the viability of our denominations.

But "Christ has really set us free!" Paul cried (Galatians 5:1, New Living Translation). And one of Martin Luther's most famous writings is titled, appropriately, "The Freedom of a Christian" (1520). These saints remind us that God has set us free to be a voice of hope in this world, to be bold enough to work for an end to world hunger and peace in our time. They remind us that because we belong to Christ we can live lives of fearlessness, gracefulness, and radical generosity. They show us what it looks like to dare to love across every boundary.

We Find Hope and Healing in Their Stories

The stories of the saints shape us. And they fill our lives with hope and healing. This gift became real to me in the laughter of the saints who gathered in the church basement of my childhood, doing crafts together for some sale or another. You see, one of those saints, my grandmother, had a radical mastectomy before I can remember, maybe even before I was born. And for years, until they came out with something better, she wore a foam pad that she called a "falsie." Remember, this was a very, very long time ago. Before you talked about this kind of thing. Before Betty Ford told women they needed to get regular breast exams. And, to top it all off, my grandmother was a full-blooded Norwegian. Not one to talk about personal matters, thank you very much. But she was quite a character, at least as Scandinavians go. When she worked on her crafts, down in that church basement, with all those other women, she used that falsie as a pin cushion. She looked like some sort of voodoo doll! And, oh, those ladies would laugh.

Gathered in that place was a community of saints who provided the love, the healing, and the hope I had learned about in Bible stories. One of my favorites is told in the second chapter of Mark. You know this story, right? Jesus is staying with some friends in a house in Capernaum. And while he's there, he does a little teaching . . . and a lot of healing. One night, the house is

so packed with people looking for what Jesus is giving away that the friends of a paralyzed man have to climb up on the roof of the house and tear it apart to make a hole through which they can lower him to Jesus. These friends are determined to change their friend's life and there is *nothing* that can stop them. Those saints in Mark's story, like the saints in that church basement, provide healing, love, and comfort for their friend. Through the stories of these saints, we learn that laughter heals, that being loved can make you whole, and that through the things we say and do for each other Jesus can still work miracles.

We Are Nudged into Action by Their Stories

The stories of the saints shape our lives and give us hope when things are hard. And, sometimes, they give us the kick in the pants we need.

The times, it has been said, are a-changing. Sometimes I feel like I'm living in a foreign land. Not all that long ago, I felt pretty hip and edgy. I wore cool clothes. I was technically pretty with-it. I knew the hottest music (and actually liked it). Then I turned 40. Two of my three kids are in college; the other is in high school. They talk to their friends on-line through Web sites like Facebook, listen to musical genres I didn't know existed, and speak in languages I don't understand. (Have you ever looked over the shoulder of a teenager as she IMs [instant messages] her many friends?!)

We face similar challenges in our congregations. Most people in our neighborhoods don't quite speak our language. They don't love our music or understand our traditions. They have no idea what a circle is, let alone why they would want to be a part of one. They see welcome signs on the front lawns of our churches, but hear us arguing about who is *really* welcome. They want solutions to homelessness, the health care crisis, hunger, and all of the issues related to immigration . . . but we are mostly silent about these things. And sometimes we seem unsure about whether or not we have anything of value to offer.

It would be tempting to conclude that this gap is simply too wide to get over.

But the saints won't have it. On that first Pentecost, they spoke in as many languages as there were people in the city (see the second chapter of Acts). The Holy Spirit gave them this gift. Why wouldn't the Spirit give it to us, too? Speaking German, Swedish, Norwegian, and Finnish, our immigrant ancestors planted churches across this new country. Why wouldn't we plant new churches for the immigrants among us today? Why wouldn't we figure out how to worship in the language of a new generation? Why wouldn't we do whatever it takes to get the Good News out in a way that embraces, communicates with, and welcomes all of God's people?

...THE PEOPLE IN THIS STORY HAVE SHAPED ME. THESE PEOPLE ARE ME."

The saints and their stories have changed us, challenged us, and healed us. Their stories, thankfully, even haunt us when we are lazy or tired or scared.

The freedom with which the saints lived their lives dares us to risk following wherever the Spirit leads. Dares us to take risks in the name of Jesus. Dares us to do even the most outrageous things for the sake of love. We couldn't possibly look sillier than a voodoo doll!

Tana M. Kjos has a master's degree in mission and leadership from Luther Seminary and 15 years experience leading organizations into renewal. She is the co-founder and creative director of A.R.E.: A Renewal Enterprise, doing consulting and leadership coaching for faith-based, non-profit, and for-profit values-based organizations of all sizes. She is available to speak and lead workshops. For more information visit www.ARenewalEnterprise.com.



BIBLE STUDY

BLESSED TO FOLLOW: THE BEATITUDES AS A COMPASS FOR DISCIPLESHIP

SESSION 3

Blessing in the Country of Mourning

by Martha E. Stortz

See a video clip of author Martha E. Stortz introducing Session 3 of this Bible study at www.lutheranwomantoday.org.
The Bible study has a blog! Check out www.lwtmagazine.blogspot.com.

Theme verse

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." (Matthew 5:4)

Opening

Hymn "I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 815; *With One Voice* 649

Prayer

Gracious God,
you know the country of our mourning,
you know the terrain of our tears,
because you have been there
in the flesh of your dear Son, Jesus;
Heal our griefs, mend our hearts,
raise our spirits, even as you raised Jesus.
Bring light into our hearts
and grant us comfort when we mourn.
We ask all this in the name of your Son,
whose death you mourned. Amen.

Introduction

In this session, we enter the country of mourning with two biblical women as our guides: Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, and Mary, the mother of Jesus. There we encounter Jesus both as one who mourns and as one who comforts those who mourn through the blessing of his Spirit, the Comforter. In following a master who both mourns with us and comforts us, we discover a discipleship bold enough to "boast of suffering," as the apostle Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans (5:3). Finally, we look at the Christian practice of remembering the dead. As we remember them, we discover how the saints spend their days: blessing, comforting, and re-membering us.

Mentors in Mourning and Hope: Hagar and Mary

Loss dumps us into a wilderness of mourning, and we wander until we find our way out. A ballad puts

the experience simply: "The only way out is through." Yet the wanderer finds herself blessed with guides. We have two powerful biblical guides in Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, and Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Hagar in the Wilderness

READ GENESIS 16:1–16; 17:18–23; 21:9–21.

Chapters 11–25 of Genesis recount the story of Abraham and Sarah, whose names God changes and whose childlessness God alters. Yet there is another story within theirs, and the story of Hagar and her son, Ishmael, is an important interruption. Reading their story whole respects the wilderness of Hagar's grief–and celebrates her comfort. As we reconstruct the story of Hagar and Ishmael from the bits scattered across Genesis, we see that what begins in mourning ends in blessing.

Hagar and Ishmael find themselves in the wilderness twice, and both times they prepare to die. The first time, Ishmael is growing in the womb of the enslaved Hagar. Sarai has expelled her from the household of Abram, where Hagar was impregnated by Abram at Sarai's command. Today we would call this rape, but the ancient world regarded servants as property of their owners.

Perhaps Sarai hoped to raise the child as her own, for her barrenness made her an object of shame. Perhaps Abram hoped for an heir, someone to fulfill God's promise that he would be the founder of "a great nation." Whatever their hopes, Hagar's wishes did not count. When she conceived, Sarai thought Hagar was treating her with contempt. Abram did not protest when Sarai sent the pregnant slave away. That could have ended the story, for being banished into the wilderness was a death sentence.

What comfort could Hagar hope for? The divine command to return to her high-handed mistress could not have been good news. Yet the angel of the Lord comforts her with the knowledge that she will live and bear a son, and the angel blesses her with a name for the boy: Ishmael. Hagar receives all of this, and she offers a blessing and bestows a name of her own. At the very place where she had faced death, she sees God–and lives. Her story recalls that of Job, another person thrust into the country of mourning. (See Job 42:5, one of the best verses in all of Scripture.)

Hagar and Ishmael later find themselves in the wilderness a second time, again by the jealousy of Sarai–now called Sarah. Anxious to keep God's promises all to herself and her own offspring, Sarah has Abraham (formerly Abram) banish the two. Hagar is certain of death; she cannot bear to watch her child die.

Before this second desert wandering, Abraham stands up for his illegitimate son, begging God to watch over him (Genesis 17:18). God promises that Ishmael too will be blessed. And God delivers.

What comfort could Hagar hope for this time? If she hopes for a repeat of the angel's first performance, she is disappointed. This time she sees not God, but a well from which she and her son may drink. If she hopes to be returned to civilization, she is disappointed. She and Ishmael make the wilderness their home, moving from oasis to oasis with the desert's seasons. God fulfills his promise to Abraham and Hagar (17:20). From them a great nation is born, and that nation arises out of the very place where Ishmael had faced death: the desert.

How does the story of Hagar's mourning comfort us? Four blessings come from the scattered story of this desert wanderer:

- Comfort comes–but not always in ways we expect. God hears the cries of Hagar and Ishmael, and God answers them.
- Comfort doesn't come in the same way twice. God's first wilderness comfort comes through submission to grief, as God orders Hagar to go back to her oppressor. God's second wilderness comfort

comes when the wilderness becomes home.
- The wilderness of mourning is also a place where we can see God–and live.
- The wilderness can become a home and a place of blessing.

1. ***What other blessings do you find in the story of Hagar and Ishmael?***
2. ***What comforts or insights have you realized from your own wilderness of grief? What comforts did you expect—and what comforts did you receive?***
3. ***Can you think of any other Old Testament guides for the country of mourning?***

Mary in the Wilderness

READ LUKE 2:25–40.

Like Hagar's story, Mary's story is told on the margins. The Gospels focus on the life of Jesus; the life of his mother must be gathered from scattered snippets. She too faced the death of a child; she too watched death from a distance. Hagar guarded Ishmael from an arrow's shot away; Mary stood at the foot of a cross. As life drained out of Jesus' body, she must have remembered the prophecy of Simeon: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed–and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:34–35).

Those words must have terrified Mary when she first heard them. She would have mourned–without quite knowing what to weep for. That grief of certain tragedy made Mary into an icon of suffering, the *mater dolorosa* or sorrowful mother. Particularly in times and places with high rates of infant mortality, the image of the sorrowful mother took on huge significance.

Yet Simeon's prophecy was not only a warning; he began with a blessing. As we gather the story of Mary from its scattered places throughout the Gospels, we find Simeon's blessing borne out in many and various ways. Mary occasioned Jesus' first miracle in the wedding at Cana, where he turned ordinary water into extraordinary wine (John 2:1–11). At the foot of the cross, Jesus blessed Mary with a surrogate son as he blessed John with a surrogate mother, entrusting the two people he loved most to each other (John 19:25–27). The Gospels do not name Mary as present for any of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, but she prayed with the disciples after Jesus' ascension (Acts 1:14) and was presumably present for the descent of the Spirit, the Comforter, at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4).

4. ***What must it have been like for Mary to know what the future held for her child and for herself? Did she mourn in advance?***
5. ***What must it have been like to see Simeon's words come true for her son? For herself? Where did she find comfort?***

How does the story of Mary's mourning comfort us? Four blessings come from the scattered story of Jesus' mother.

- Comfort comes when we listen for it. In her instructions to the servants at Cana, Mary leaves counsel for anyone looking for a path through the wilderness: "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). In this journey without maps, disciples follow a Person, and we need to listen for his voice.
- Comfort comes in unexpected moments. The ordinary elements of daily life–words, work, water, wine–bear God's extraordinary graces, as we see in what happened at the wedding at Cana.
- Loss opens the door to new possibilities. Jesus' death opens the door to a new relationship between Mary and the beloved disciple.
- Jesus blesses us with his Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the Comforter. The Spirit of the risen Christ descended

on the disciples at Pentecost and remains in the world for all time.

6. ***What other blessings do you find in the story of Mary's mourning?***
7. ***What disguised comforts have come to you in ordinary life?***
8. ***Has loss opened the door to new possibilities in your own life? How?***
9. ***Are there other New Testament guides for the country of mourning?***

Jesus: One who Mourns, One who Comforts

READ JOHN 11:1–44.

Every confirmation kid hopes that the Bible verse she'll have to memorize will be the Bible's shortest: "Jesus wept" (John 11:35, KJV). But these two words pack a punch. They tell us of Jesus' humanity. Being Son of God and Ruler of the Universe could not spare him tears. He wept when he learned of his dear friend Lazarus' death. Under the weight of Martha's bold confession (11:27) and Mary's tender tears (11:32–33), Jesus shed tears of his own.

Martha is really the first evangelist. She understands Jesus' true identity as no one else has, particularly not his closest friends, the disciples. Martha blurts out what it took a complete outsider to see in Mark's Gospel–and then only after Jesus' crucifixion: "Truly this man was God's Son!" (Mark 15:39) Martha says with conviction: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (John 11:27). Her sister Mary's tears show us the depth of Jesus' compassion. He knows Lazarus is dead, yet that fact has not brought him to tears. But seeing Mary's grief draws out his own. "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (11:33). Both sisters blame Lazarus' death on Jesus' absence–in the same words: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (11:21, 32), though we can imagine that each woman's tone of voice was quite different from her sister's.

Nor were these the only tears Jesus shed. He wept over the fate of Jerusalem, uttering words that echo for that same city today: "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!" (Luke 19:42) Even then, Jerusalem fell under the judgment of war and faction. Were there tears in the garden of Gethsemane? The Gospels record that Jesus was "in anguish . . . . and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground" (Luke 22:44; see also Matthew 26:37–39).

Jesus' tears over the loss of a dear friend, the fate of the holy city, and his own impending death make clear for us his humanity. He knows the full range of human experience, and the comfort he offered then and now comes from the depths of suffering.

When my husband, a former Roman Catholic priest, finally married, one of his old high school buddies clapped him on the back and said: "Thanks for becoming one of us." Most of the boys in the St. Ignatius Prep graduating class of 1962 had been married for decades by that time, and now he was joining their ranks. He would know first-hand that strange and wonderful country of marriage.

Jesus became "one of us" to experience the full range of human experience: joy and sorrow, delight and mourning. When people pose the ancient questions that always come with grief–"Why me?" "Why him?" "Why do bad things happen to good people?" I have no answers. No one does. Instead I find myself thinking about that old high school buddy: "Thanks for becoming one of us." God doesn't give us an explanation for suffering; God gives us a Son, so that God could experience everything that the human condition offers.

Because he too has suffered, the comfort Jesus offers to disciples through the centuries is real. In the

Gospels, we can tell that he could already taste his disciples' tears, and he prepared them for the awful absence his death would bring. He promised to send them his Spirit, the Spirit of truth or "the Advocate" (see John 14:16, 14:26, 15:26, 16:7). When the Greek word for "advocate," *parakletos* (par-AH-clay-tos), is translated as "the Comforter," as older translations have it, we see the resonance between the sending of the Spirit and the blessing of the Beatitude.

While mourners may choose consolation over advocacy in the immediate aftermath of loss, over time they will need both. We need people to stand *with* us in our pain; we also need people to stand *for* us when we are too exhausted or overwrought to stand up for ourselves. I remember the wail of a new widow: "I can barely get out of bed in the morning. How am I going to get death certificates to everyone who needs one?" A faithful son-in-law stepped in and did the work for her. He stood *with* her in her grief; he stood *for* her as they sorted through the mountain of paperwork. Biblical understandings of advocacy and comfort are closely linked. The comfort that Jesus promises offers both. Simeon's great hope echoes here. He had long looked forward "to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him" (Luke 2:25). That hope is both spiritual and political. The original Greek that the evangelist wrote is telling: the consolation, *paraklesin*, of Israel.

Apostolic Mourning

Abraham's wife, Sarah, wanted to hoard her blessings, ensuring that her offspring would be the seed of a great nation, not Hagar's. Little did she know the abundance of God's blessing. There is plenty to go around. There's always more than you need.

Loss is strangely liberating, leaving people untethered from familiar moorings and open to anything. If they can't find any bearings, people drift into despair. But some people often find that loss anchors them deeper in the mystery that holds them.

The apostle Paul names this mystery in his letter to the Romans (5:3–5):

> ". . . we also boast in our sufferings,
> knowing that suffering produces endurance,
> and endurance produces character,
> and character produces hope,
> and hope does not disappoint us,
> because God's love has been
> poured into our hearts
> through the Holy Spirit that has
> been given to us."

This is a tough recipe for building character, but Paul promises that the black hole of absence will not remain empty forever. Love fills in the cracks of longing. Moreover, that love comes from the very One who promises comfort. Only he can offer the comfort mourners crave. The love of the Risen Christ comes in unexpected ways, some dazzling, others so ordinary we don't even notice them. But love pours down like manna in the wilderness of Sinai. Like the ancient Israelites, all we need to do is pick it up (Exodus 16:14–21). When the Israelites tried to hoard the daily portion, taking more than they needed, it spoiled–they fared worse than Sarah! But there's an interesting lesson about hoarding blessings here.

When my husband was dying, we found manna aplenty, and it sustained us. We tried out a new recipe–and it worked. We plotted a new route for the daily walk–and it was beautiful. At night we counted our blessings; there were many. On the worst days we laughed: "The best thing that happened today was that it ended." Those awful days were actually few in number; we were being tutored in the daily graces God's love was poured into our hearts.

10. When you were in the midst of great loss, what comforted you?

11. When did you feel you comforted someone? What did you do?

Whom do you mourn? Consider lighting a candle in memory of someone you have lost. Bring the person to mind; remember his or her presence.

12. Is the memory of that person's loving presence a comfort?

Practice: Remembering the Saints

On the Festival of All Saints (November 1) Christians pause to remember all their foremothers and forefathers in the faith. The texts for that feast day always include the Beatitudes. This is no coincidence. As we pause to remember the saints, we discover to our surprise that they were here first (see article on page 22). They re-member us—and not in the sense of thinking about us and calling us to the mind of God. In a real way, remembering the saints fashions us anew, renews our lives as we take a new direction after a time in the wilderness. That's re-membering.

The Saints Bless Us. The Revelation to John climaxes the entire sweep of Scripture, and it gives us some beautiful glimpses of the schedule of the saints. They abandon themselves to blessing.

READ REVELATION 7:12 ALOUD.

Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God for ever and ever!"

Praise flows effortlessly from the lips of the saints, because they are unbound, liberated from e-mail and cell phones, freed from deadlines and committee meetings. Martin Luther captures this when he describes Adam in the garden, Adam as God intended him. Luther imagines him "intoxicated with rejoicing toward God and . . . delighted with all the other creatures" *(Lectures on Genesis 2:9, 1535,* LW 1:94). Call him drunk on God. That's what Adam was up to in the Garden. Restored to their created goodness, the saints before the throne of God spend their days drunk on God, rejoicing toward God.

13. Who are some of the saints you remember frequently?

14. Why are they saints for you?

15. What blessings do they bring?

16. How has someone still living blessed you unexpectedly?

If you are keeping a journal, consider writing about your answers to the following questions:

17. As you remember someone who has died, how has the loss blessed you?

18. As you remember someone who has died, how does the memory of that person comfort you?

19. As you remember someone who has died, how does remembering that person re-member you? What's the new life that you are living?

The Saints Comfort Us. The saints also comfort us. The week after my husband Bill died I told his siblings to pay attention: We were going to be shown that he was in good hands. I was walking along the beach watching for dolphins—and a dolphin leapt completely out of the water. Bill's sister saw a stag bolt across a stream in a mountain meadow. All around the family, there were reports of grasshoppers springing and rabbits bounding, all these lovely leaping things. As we compared notes a month later, we laughed about our—what? coincidences? epipha-

nies?–and in our laughter together, remembering Bill, we were enormously consoled. We all discovered the truth of this Beatitude. Just as Jesus had promised, we were comforted.

Closing Prayer

Hymn "Come, My Way, My Truth, My Life," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 816; *Lutheran Book of Worship* 513

Prayer

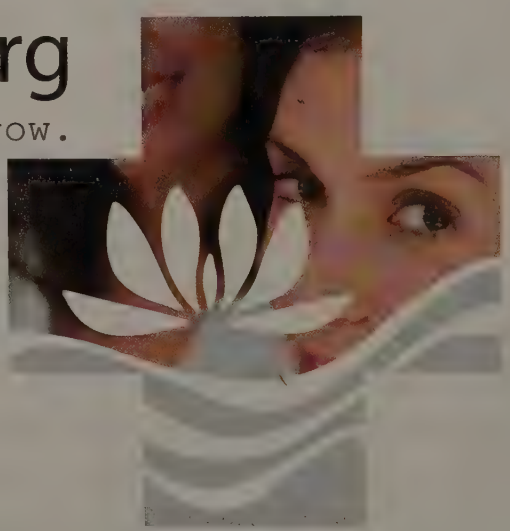
Holy Jesus, you weep with us in our sorrow,
you mourn with us in our grieving,
you promise that in your kingdom
every tear will be wiped away
and there will be no more weeping.
We remember those who go before us,
helping prepare a place for us
at your heavenly banquet,
and we call them to mind:
(Silence to remember names)
Grant us the grace to comfort others,
even as we mourn.
We pray today for all who mourn
especially those whom we name before you:
Finally, remember us in your kingdom,
as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray:
"Our Father in heaven . . ."
Amen.

Looking ahead: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

These troubled times make one wonder if the meek might do better running things than the powerful have so far. But it's hard to shake the popular perception: Meek means weak. As you prepare for the next Bible study, remember Moses as the man whose meekness was both legendary and laudable (Numbers 12:3). What does his story tell us about this characteristic of discipleship?

Martha E. Stortz is professor of historical theology and ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, Calif., and the author of *A World according to God* (Jossey-Bass, 2004).

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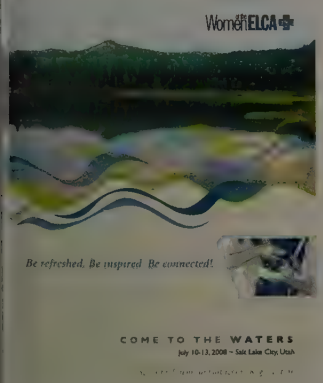


Café is a free, monthly on-line magazine for young women offered by Women of the ELCA.



WE RECOMMEND

Resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study



Save the date and Come to the Waters

The Seventh Triennial Women of the ELCA Convention and Gathering will be July 8–13, 2008, at Salt Palace Convention Center, Salt Lake City, Utah. Early-bird registration for the "Come to the Waters" Convention and Gathering is $275 and ends Jan. 31, 2008. If you save less than $3 a day from Nov. 1 through Jan. 31, you'll have your registration fee.

The Gathering begins Thursday, July 10, with an opening plenary and a performance by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Other activities include a celebration of the Women of the ELCA's 20th anniversary, a Run, Walk, and Roll event, various workshops and speakers, Bible study, and city tours.

The Convention business sessions will be held July 8–10 for registered delegates and any Women of the ELCA participant who wishes to attend and observe. For more information on the event, including speakers and workshops, visit www.womenoftheelca.org or call Laura Barkenquast at 800-638-3522, ext. 2737.

Join the MIF Challenge

Women of the ELCA received a challenge from the ELCA Mission Investment Fund (MIF) to create 1,000 new individual accounts starting June 1, 2006 through June 30, 2008. The challenge awards Women of the ELCA $25,000 toward the 2008 Triennial Gathering in Salt Lake City, Utah. All you need to do is complete a simple and easy application form and, for as little as $25, you can open an account today.

MIF will staff a service center at the 2008 Triennial Convention and the triennial gathering in Salt Lake City for the convenience of participants. If you open a personal MissionPlus investment, you will be able to cash checks against your MIF account at the Gathering. It's a win-win situation!

Take advantage of this great offer now. Visit the Mission Investment Fund (www.missioninvestmentfund.org) to learn how the challenge works and to request your packet.

Get a free hunger newsletter

Are you looking for articles, facts, or information about your congregation's donations to the ELCA World Hunger Appeal? Go to www.elca.org/hunger/newsletter for the latest issue of *LifeLines*, a free quarterly publication.

View the latest newsletter or browse recent back issues, which include articles on Stand With Africa, the Millennium Development Goals, HIV/AIDS, hunger in the United States, and more.

If you would like to be placed on the newsletter mailing list, e-mail your name and mailing address to hunger@elca.org with the words "New LifeLines subscription" in the subject line or e-mail body.

Get connected!

Join the Women of the ELCA e-mail list. Send your name, and e-mail address to Women.ELCA@elca.org. Put the words "subscribe e-mail" in the subject line.



HEALTH WISE

Fend Off the Flu

by Molly M. Ginty

This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls. Visit www.womenoftheelca.org for more information.

An eight-year-old boy in St. Paul, Minnesota.

A 16-year-old girl in Williamson County, Texas.

An 85-year-old businessman in Toledo, Ohio.

Last year, all three died of flu complications—a fate that can be avoided by getting a flu shot.

November marks the start of influenza season and the arrival of the flu virus that sends 200,000 Americans to the hospital and kills 36,000 each year.

"To stay healthy, adults and children should both get vaccinated now," says Dr. Katherine Poehling, an assistant professor of medicine at Wake Forest University.

Affecting 5 to 20 percent of us each winter, the flu virus can be tough to fend off without vaccination, as it's transmitted via droplets released whenever an infected person coughs, speaks, or even breathes. A single sneeze from a stranger is all it takes for the virus to enter your body and attack your nose, throat, airways, and lungs, triggering congestion, chills, coughing, headache, fatigue, fever, muscle aches, and digestive problems that can include loss of appetite, diarrhea, and vomiting.

Bed rest and fluid intake are usually enough to vanquish such symptoms. Chicken soup or other hot drinks can help relieve congestion. Over-the-counter pain relievers can ease headaches and muscle aches. Prescription antiviral drugs such as Tamiflu or Relenza, taken within two days of symptoms' appearance, can diminish the flu's length by two days.

For some people, however, these remedies may not be enough. Pregnant women, children under five, adults over 50, health care workers, people in regular contact with children, and people with chronic diseases such as asthma, diabetes, or heart disease are especially likely to develop secondary flu complications such as bronchitis or pneumonia.

Because flu complications can kill, authorities suggest that everyone in these high-risk groups get vaccinated in the late fall so their immune systems have time to develop antibodies that will protect them when influenza season peaks from December through March. They can either get the annual shot or FluMist, vaccine in the form of a nasal spray.

"If possible, you should get vaccinated even if you're not in a high-risk group," says Dr. William Schaffner, chair of the department of preventive medicine at Vanderbilt University. "Neither shots nor FluMist are recommended for babies under 6 months, on whom they have not been thoroughly tested. FluMist shouldn't be used by pregnant women or people with compromised immunity because it contains live but weakened viruses," he said. "Otherwise, these vaccines are safe. The virus in the shot is not active. It's a piece of the virus, dead and broken up, so you can't get infected from it. That you can is just an urban myth."

Vaccines are your best bet for fending off the flu. Shots can be 90 percent effective, and FluMist can be 60 percent so. Good health habits can also boost

your odds. In addition to getting vaccinated, you should be careful during flu season to eat well, sleep soundly, and get regular exercise, which strengthens your immune system. To prevent the spread of germs, use hand sanitizer and wash your hands frequently, scrubbing with soap for at least 15 seconds. Shunning crowds and minimizing travel can also help. Last year, a Harvard study found that the holiday airline travel season that begins at Thanksgiving each year may be the central event that determines how rapidly the flu spreads.

How could flying give you the flu? Because influenza, like a seasoned traveler, gets around. Lurking in different forms in different parts of the globe, the flu comes in three basic strains with many subtypes: A (responsible for large pandemics), B (triggering smaller outbreaks), and C (which is less common, less mutable, and more mild). When you're infected by one subtype, your immune system develops antibodies that will fight that particular strain in the future. But travelers come into contact with different brands of flu, which is why researchers work to develop new flu vaccines each year.

In 1918, an A-strain "Spanish flu" swept the planet and claimed 20 million lives. Scientists theorize that if a flu pandemic as severe were to strike again, it would kill 62 million people–90 percent of them in developing countries where poor nutrition means that many people don't get the vitamin A and zinc necessary for healthy immune function. Like the avian flu viruses now circulating in Asia, the 1918 virus was a bird flu that jumped directly from birds to humans and was especially resistant to treatment.

Last year, scientists from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention discovered that recent flu strains have developed mutations that make them more difficult for our bodies to fend off. Researchers analyzed 7,000 flu virus samples from around the globe and found that 12.3 percent of samples collected in 2004 were resistant to older flu drugs, compared to 0.4 percent that were drug-resistant in 1994.

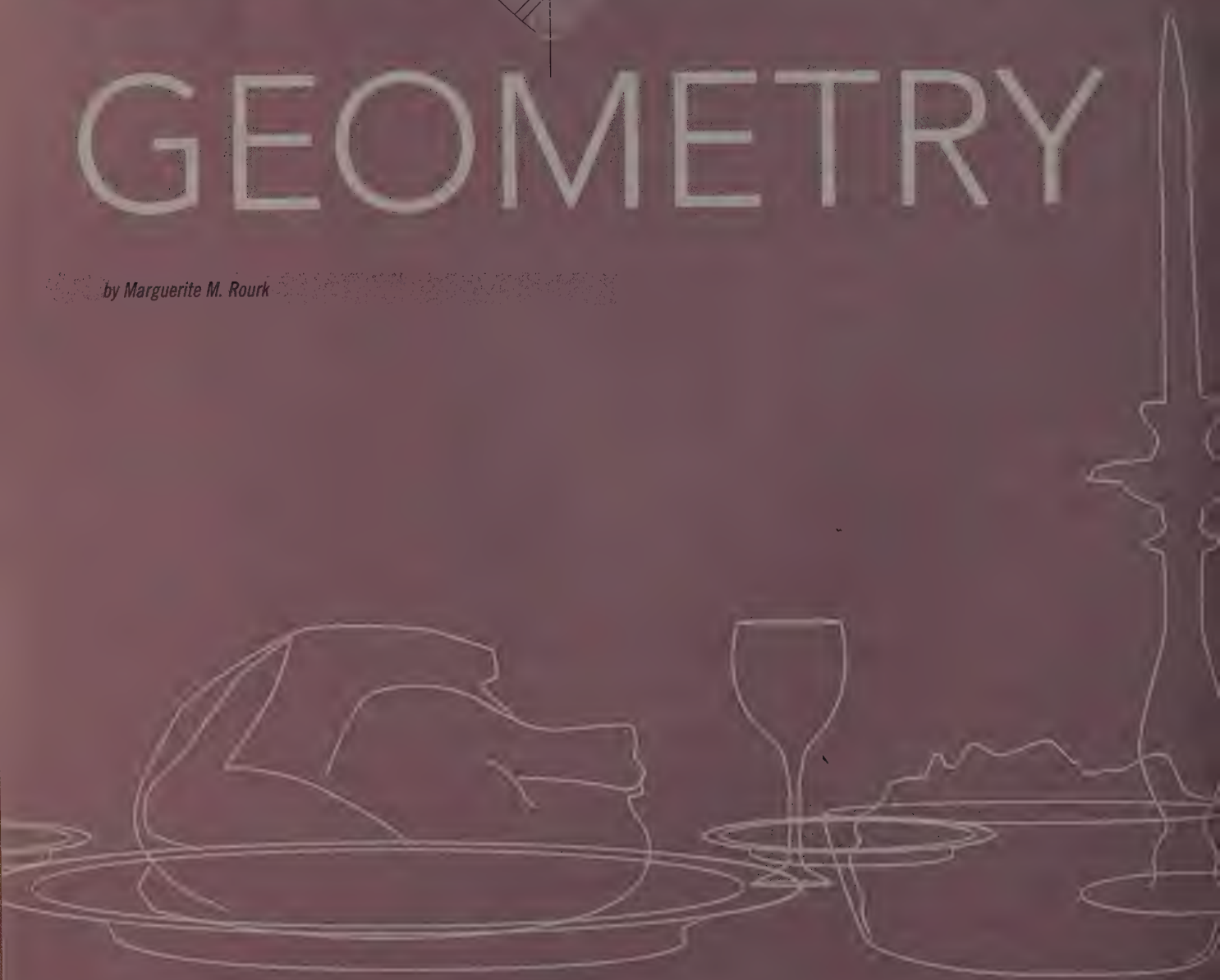


The good news is that flu viruses worldwide can still be stopped with newer drugs such as Tamiflu and Relenza, which the U.S. government is stockpiling. We now have medical interventions not available a century ago, such as ventilators that help flu victims breathe and antibiotics that treat pneumonia. "Scientists have even developed a vaccine for bird flu," says Schaffner, "and they're stocking up on it to help contain a possible outbreak."

Molly M. Ginty lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *Ms., Marie Claire, Redbook,* and *Women's eNews.*

DIVINE GEOMETRY

by Marguerite M. Rourk



In his first letter to the church at Thessalonica, the Apostle Paul wrote:

REJOICE ALWAYS,
PRAY WITHOUT
CEASING,
GIVE THANKS
IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES;
FOR THIS IS
THE WILL OF GOD
IN CHRIST JESUS
FOR YOU
(1 THESSALONIANS 5:16–18).

I was not a happy person. I was 15, a sophomore in high school. Of course, I have known for some time now that being 15, a sophomore, and unhappy are certainly of a piece and probably redundant. Nevertheless, at that time, my general fifteen-ness, my particular sophomore-ness, and my precise unhappiness were all greatly exacerbated by having to take geometry. I was not thankful for geometry.

My dad said, "Geometry's great!" It was not.
My mother said, "Oh, you'll like it!" I did not.
My teacher said, "It's the fun math!" No, it wasn't.
My friends said, "It's the cool math!" Not to me.

Geometric terms, like some weird, ominous mantra, just seemed to waft unbidden through my life during that entire year. Two of my friends lived on *Euclid* Avenue. *Hypotenuse.* Isn't that an enormous herbivore with a huge nose and teensy ears that lives in the African rivers? *Pyramids* hadn't been built by anybody for 3,000 or 4,000 years, so why did I have to know how to calculate their area? Besides, Egypt already had plenty and somebody already knew their area. *Biconditional* referred to certain people not ever mentioned in polite conversation in 1961. And just try running a *hypothesis* by your mother and see how far it got you. *Circumference* wasn't discussed either, mostly because all the ladies I knew were forever trying to make theirs smaller, and 15-year-old unhappy sophomore girls were trying to increase theirs in a certain strategic area of their incarnation. *Concurrent* lines were what you stood in to get tickets to the circus or movies like *Ben-Hur* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's.* My 16-year-old cousin who already had his driver's license told me that an *equilateral quadrangle* meant how many times you had to go around a block before an *end* parking space came open.

I also didn't like geometry because you had to use *stuff*–sharp pointy metal things and plastic geegaws–a compass that didn't point in any direction, and a stupid little curved ruler called a protractor. The only thing that got protracted was my agony. I was not thankful for geometry.

And you had to memorize. Now, my memory worked just fine–for useful things. I had already learned vocabulary for two other languages and memorized a zillion recipes for Home Economics class.

As a child I had memorized enough kiddie choir and youth chorus music to sing until Judgment Day, and my piano teacher had made me memorize all of Bach's two-part Inventions. But in geometry, memorize for *what*? You couldn't play it or sing it or cook it. All that memorizing and you couldn't smell it or taste it, or hear it or eat the results.

You didn't get anything for reciting it either. (My devout Baptist Grandma used to pay me a quarter apiece to memorize psalms–that was big money back then, which made the memorizing enterprise most definitely worth the trouble.) But memorize that all useless junk in geometry? Didn't do a thing but burn up perfectly good brain cells for nothing. It was a looooong year: axioms to grind and proofs that were all problems. It was an angled and arced Pythagorean nightmare, and I was not thankful.

God's dimensions

In boundless mercy, however, God has forgiven me my acute immaturity and my obtuse lack of gratitude. Indeed, in these ensuing 45 years, the good Lord has taught me about another geometry–the divine sort–all about the lines and connections and intersections and the dimensions of God's loving purpose for us. And whatever angles and arcs and shapes our lives take, God's geometry is truly marvelous.

In God's geometry there are no theorems in search of proofs. There are lots of wonderful givens, including *God is love* and *God loves us.*

God's love is that plane for which we have searched, even when we were too blind to notice that it's the one we already live on. God's love is the food for which we have hungered, even as we have failed to recognize such life-giving sustenance right in front of us. God's love is the bread we have craved, although we have coveted and chased after one trendy morsel or another.

In divine geometry, there are no angles to God's love, no corners to conceal lurking limitations or conditional corollaries. God's love is the place where our lives and God's Creation Intentions for us are joined, not as intersecting lines, but along a congruent line called *with.* In the Almighty's geometry, God-with-us equals us-with-God, because the One who loves us wants it that way. God-with-us chooses to have us be us-with-God, and gives us everything for our living and our well-being, We are held fast in God's heart, today and always.

By divine geometry, our Lord has drawn us within that perfect circle that embraces saints above and saints below. By God's configuration, we are bound together in a perfect design that stretches all the way from the Day of Creation to the Day of Jesus Christ. From our birth we are plotted into God's perfect graph, each one of us a factor of the Holy Number that is calculated in God's perfect equation.

Each of us is a whole number, a positive quantity factored into the plus side of life, because that is God's gracious way. We are given an unknown number of gifts of the Spirit (how's that for amazing grace?) that we are able to call on an infinite number of times during our finite lifetime and which we will surely use for eternal praise in the infinite lifetime that will be ours in God's good time.

When St. Ignatius, the ancient, fiery little bishop of Antioch, was being hauled off to Rome on a straight line to martyrdom, he wrote in 105 A.D. to his beloved congregations and to his people back home: "I have no taste for the corruptible food or for the delights of this life. The Bread of God is what I desire!"

Even so the Lord of all lines and circles has come to us and invited us, saying, "Eat! Drink!" He gives his body: This is the bread for us. He offers his blood: We need no other wine. The bread of life–sacred formula, a small bite, perfectly measured and proportioned for our need. The cup of salvation–mysterious properties, a tiny sip filling us brim-full with forgiveness and comfort, and fulfilling us in joy and love and peace.

This Eucharist, this thanksgiving, is God's geometry: holy givens and sacred proofs. Jesus says *Do this!* God forbid that, like a certain foolish 15-year-old high school sophomore, we presume to decide what will and will not occasion our thanks, as though giving thanks were an act we could choose to do. Being thankful is not something we do; being thankful is who we are. We are God's thanksgiving people! It is our Lord Jesus himself who invites us to his Thanksgiving Table. So, come now; take these gifts, his gifts, in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving.

The Rev. Marguerite M. Rourk, pastor of Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church in Fairfax, Va., shares her life with David, her husband of 37 years, their sons Edwin, of Portland, Ore., and Matthew, of Asheville, N.C., two cats, and two ferrets. As ever, the ferrets are in charge.

Lutheran Hospitals *Living Out the Diaconal Call*

by Audrey Novak Riley

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us a parable. "I was sick and you visited me," he says, and his puzzled disciples wonder, "When did we see you sick?" And he tells them (and us), "Whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me."

Christians have long taken these words to heart. St. Elizabeth of Hungary, whom we commemorate this month, built a hospital for the sick and suffering in the 13th century. Many hospitals are named after her worldwide.

In the United States, Lutheran hospitals began with the work of the Rev. William A. Passavant, whom we also remember this month. In 1849, he and four deaconesses from the Kaiserswerth motherhouse in Germany opened a small hospital in Pittsburgh.

From that humble beginning has grown the vast network of Lutheran health care and social service ministries, which now includes more than 300 organizations. In 2007, 10 hospitals are affiliated with the ELCA. Several of these benefited from the dedication of deaconesses in their earliest years, including Immanuel Hospital in Omaha; Lutheran Medical Center in Brooklyn; Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge, Illinois; and Bethesda Hospital in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Over the years, many Lutheran hospitals have linked together in networks, and some of these networks have merged with other entities. For example, Lutheran General in Park Ridge is part of the Advocate Health Care System, which is related to both the ELCA and the United Church of Christ. Another example is the statewide Fairview Health System in Minnesota, a result of a merger between Fairview Hospital and the University of Minnesota. But all Lutheran health care ministries share a commitment to living out their diaconal call.

In 2003, the ELCA adopted the social statement "Caring for Health: A Shared Endeavor." Since then, the ELCA has called on its affiliated hospitals not only for help in time of need, but for resources on trends in health care. In return, the churchwide organization has helped connect the hospitals with congregations and other Lutheran agencies. For example, Lutheran Medical Center in Brooklyn and Advocate Health Care near Chicago organized a visit to Lutheran health care ministries in western China this year.



At Augusta Victoria Hospital, friendships form between the patients and staff in the pediatric kidney dialysis unit, where children come for treatment. West Bank children with kidney failure have only one place to receive treatment, and that is Augusta Victoria.

Commitment to health care for all

The ELCA is committed to health care for all. Some 45 million Americans–almost one-sixth of the U.S. population–live without health insurance, according to an article in the July/August 2007 issue of *AARP Magazine.*

In its 2003 social statement "Caring for Health: A Shared Endeavor," the ELCA rues the health care crises and the unnecessary endurance of poor health, especially by the impoverished (women, children, and the elderly suffer the most).

"Rising health care costs leave a growing number of people without adequate health care. Health care resources often are rationed based on ability to pay rather than need," the statement says. "Fear and self-interest defeat social justice in the political processes of health care reform. The health of each individual depends on the care of others and the commitment of society to provide health care for all.

"The Christian Church is called to be an active participant in fashioning a just and effective health care system," the statement continues. "We of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have an enduring commitment to work for and support health care for all people as a shared endeavor."

The long history of dedicated service by Lutheran hospitals and health care ministries is one example of how that commitment has been carried out in our midst.

Audrey Novak Riley is associate editor of *Lutheran Woman Today.*

You can read the entire text of the ELCA's social statement, "Caring for Health: A Shared Endeavor," at www.elca.org/SocialStatements/health.

Augusta Victoria Hospital

This call to care for the sick is carried out in other parts of the world as well. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) operates the Augusta Victoria Hospital (AVH) in East Jerusalem.

The Augusta Victoria Hospital, situated on the Mount of Olives, was established after the war of 1948, initially under the control of the Red Cross and since 1950 under LWF ownership and management.

In addition to other essential and unique health care services, AVH is the first and only hospital to provide radiation therapy for cancer patients in the Palestinian Territories. The hospital continues its basic emergency program as well as the treatment of dialysis patients, but with great difficulty due to the construction of the Israeli separation wall.

Doctors and nurses of the LWF Village Health Clinics see approximately 1,300 patients every month, despite closures, checkpoints, and various travel restrictions. The services these clinics provide include physician consultation, basic laboratory, pharmacy and supplies, health education, and home health care. In many cases the home visits are the only access that a home-bound patient has to a health-care professional.



Women of the ELCA is committed to advocacy for Augusta Victoria Hospital. To learn more about Augusta Victoria Hospital, visit www.elca.org/advocacy and click on the Take Action Now/Middle East pull-down menu, then Augusta Victoria Hospital.

As part of its special 20th anniversary offering this year, Women of the ELCA is supporting Augusta Victoria Hospital. For information, go to www.womenoftheelca.org/20years/avh.html.



GRACE NOTES

Remember the Faithful

by Linda Post Bushkofsky

My family didn't have many rituals or traditions as I was growing up. The closest we came to a ritual was baking cinnamon rolls every Saturday morning, serving pot roast every Sunday night, and taking down the Christmas tree on New Year's Day. These were more like routines than rituals, though. I always longed for more, for some ceremonial activity on significant anniversaries. When my family joined a Lutheran congregation I found some of my needs for rituals met in the liturgy.

With rituals we take an everyday occurrence and make it holy. We connect to generations before us and we connect to our communities. Rituals help make changes manageable. For example, think of graduations and weddings, where we celebrate significant change. Through rituals we transmit values, contributing to our shared identity. Rituals give us words and actions when our emotions might otherwise overwhelm. Rituals can facilitate healing, too.

When it comes to death, ritual and tradition seem especially appropriate. In a friend's family, the family members spend each Memorial Day in the local cemeteries, tidying up the grave sites of family members and placing flowers on the graves. In Latino traditions, families remember their departed loved ones on the Day of the Dead (November 2), often gathering in cemeteries.

After my father's death, I created my own tradition: On the anniversary of his death, I listen to a recording of John Rutter's *Requiem,* a piece in which I found comfort when my father died. I often look through family photo albums and think of my father while I listen to the music.

This month we observe a special time in the church calendar relating to death: All Saints Day (November 1) and All Saints Sunday (November 4). On these days we remember and celebrate the baptized people of God. Most congregations will offer a way for members to remember with thanksgiving the faithful who have died during the past year. The names might be listed in the bulletin or on a banner, prayers will remember those who have died, candles might be lit for them.

Have you thought about remembering women from your congregational unit who have died? Consider using the Litany of Remembrance (pages 68–70 of *Worship Boldly*), inserting the names of the women in your unit who have died in the past year. Light a candle as each woman is named. Share a story or remembrance about each woman. Conclude by singing the hymn "For All the Faithful Women" (pages 96–97 of *Worship Boldly*). Where appropriate, collect an offering and send it to the churchwide women's organization in memory of these women. A gift to Katie's Fund would be especially fitting.

While such a remembrance would be timely this month, you could plan such an observance any time of year, since it is never out of season to remember those who lived and died in the faith and who have been examples for us.

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.



AMEN!

Grow Gratitude

by Catherine Malotky

Just recently, we lost Al, and I am mourning him. We were not close, but we never failed to offer each other a big hug when we saw each other. He taught me so much. He was full of hope, blessing all of us younger folks as we tried to make our way as people of faith and members of the congregation he had called home for decades.

He could have been protective and proud of all the good work he and his friends had done–the ways they shepherded that congregation when they were "in their prime," as people say. I knew him well beyond the years most would count as prime, and he was a gem even as his physical energies and capabilities receded. He had a leadership rule that he would say at just the right times. "Remember," he'd say, "the time to question this decision is before it is made. Once we decide, we support it." Great rules for a healthy congregation.

He insisted that we balance the budget. Sometimes that meant painful cuts, which one year included me. But he was also enthusiastic about stewardship, so the money seemed to come in. Long after I left that congregation, I admired him and was blessed.

He was not a fancy man. He ran a shoe store with his wife and her sister and his brother-in-law. They were all four inspiring. Not without their warts, of course. I'm sure they would have had great stories to tell on each other.

Sometimes, when I am in a wilderness of soul, I think of Al and Laura, Marg and Stan.

Sometimes, when I am weary of church struggles, or when life's changes come fast and furious, I think of those four. They could have chosen a scarcity point of view, but they didn't. They did not demand the past of the future. I see them living their lives, loving that congregation and the church, holding on even when the ride was pretty wild, blessing, inviting, and welcoming.

God, in this season, I'm surrounded by the saints who have gone before. There are so many others like them. People I miss. People I need. I could be in mourning all day long.

Yet you, in your wisdom, grow gratitude out of mourning. I can see, even as I miss them, the gifts that they brought being lived out beyond their lives.

I know that many have gone before me. How many church council meetings have gone by, maybe far too late into the night, so that we are here today?

God, how will I, your saint in the making, be remembered by those who come after me? How will my congregation and this church be blessed by my having been here?

We have work to do. It's new day We have Jesus with us in the waters of baptism, calling us to new life. We have bread and wine to encourage us to remind us of just how close you are Grow gratitude out of our mourning Bud hope. Bloom love. Amen.

The Rev. Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.

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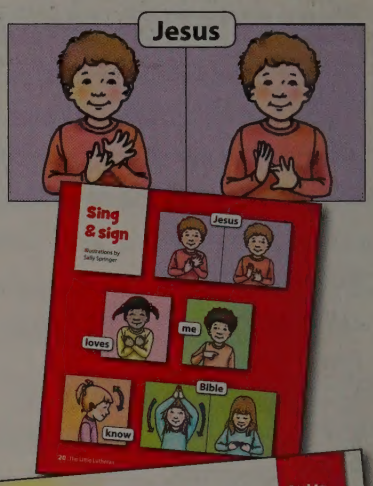
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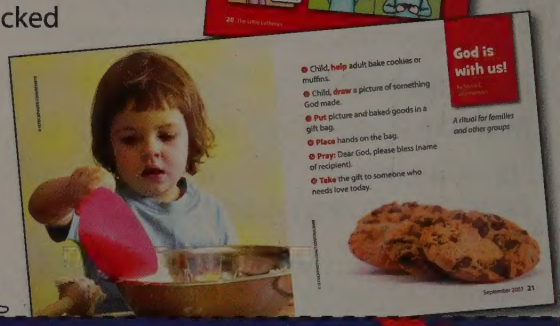
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